

## Collage Diaries

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## Collage Diaries

by [GydroZMaa](#)

### Summary

Leon (Hong Kong) and Emil (Iceland) are now "freshmeat" at the prestigious and renown Eliatha University, home to only the best of the best academics and athletes. However, with every college comes awkward moments, new faces mixed with old, and a little bit of mismatched drama in between. This story is a quirky collection of various experiences one might face in real college.

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lukas and Emil's parents were in a separate car. Since Eliatha University was on a fixed academic calendar, both of the brothers were moving to the dorms on the same day. This would be Emil's first year at the university. He was, as some upperclassmen liked to call him, "freshmeat."

Since one car wasn't big enough to haul both of their belongings to the university, the family had to take two cars: one with Emil's things and one with Lukas'. Lukas and Emil were in one car—Lukas being the driver—and their parents were in the other. The car the brothers were sitting in had Emil's things. The little questions about whether or not Emil had forgotten anything at home had died down after the first hour of driving. Other than the occasional comment about the scenery and a driver's poor motor skills, the drive was rather quiet.

"Are you nervous?" Lukas asked as the road sign displayed the words, "ELIATHA UNIVERSITY NEXT EXIT."

"No," Emil responded. "You survived. I'll be able to, too. Besides, Leon's going to be rooming with me."

Lukas blinked and adjusted his hairpin. "If you ever want to practice safe sex, you know you can just call me—"

"We're *not* a couple," Emil snapped. "We've been through this many times. It'd be awkward if we lived with each other if that were the case. Just drop it, Lukas."

His older brother only chuckled. "You never know."

"I do know. We're friends. End of story."

"Really?" Lukas smiled. "I think it's just beginning."

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Leon honestly didn't know why his entire family had to come. It was very possible for just him and Cheng to go to the university. Yao and Mei didn't have to tag along.

"This is really nostalgic," Mei wistfully sighed. "I remember when I used to drive up here."

"It certainly brings back memories," Cheng smiled. "I remember how nervous you were when you first moved in."

"Yeah," Leon's cousin laughed. "Leon, you're lucky. You already know Emil so you won't have to go through all of that adjusting stuff with your roommate."

"I suppose," he shrugged. He thought he would have been able to adjust either way, but knowing how insecure and quiet Emil could be, he couldn't bring himself to *not* dorm with him. It would be better this way.

"Aiya, we're almost there." Yao pointed to the sign saying Eliatha University was at the next exit. "Jialong, when we're there, how about we stop by your cafeteria commons and eat?"

"Don't call me that," Leon distastefully groaned. "You do know that, like, every time you go into

the D.C. I have to give up one of my meal tickets, right?"

"D.C.?" his guardian repeated, confused.

Leon rolled his eyes. Cheng and Mei wore understanding smiles since they were familiar with Yao's tendency to disregard abbreviated norms.

"D.C. is short for dining commons," Cheng explained. "It's basically the cafeteria where everyone eats."

"Oh. I knew that," Yao said, waving his hand as though it was a passing matter. "But I only wanted to go to see if they are giving you proper nutrition."

"They are," Leon sighed. "It's not high school anymore. It's Eliatha University, one of the highest ranked universities in the world. Of course they feed their students well. I went there for my orientation, and you've been there when you picked Mei up. Don't show your stupid face around me."

"Leon, manners," Cheng politely reminded him.

"Stupid," he grumbled and sank into his chair. It was a good thing Yao was driving or he might have kicked him for being so incompetent. He was going to be glad when he could finally settle in the dorm.

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Emil had seen Eliatha University a few times before when he had agreed to go with his parents to either pick up or drop off Lukas from his dorm. Before being accepted into the school, he had always seen it as an intimidating place where knowledge of the sophisticated and ambitious came to gather. Now that he was officially attending this school as a university, it was distantly starting to already feel like a second home.

"We're here," Lukas said as he turned off the car engine and unbuckled his seatbelt. "I'll help you unload here, and you can go get your room information."

"Yeah, yeah," Emil grunted as he got out of the car. Throughout the unloading area, there were bold, colorful signs with arrows telling him which way he needed to go for registration. There were already other freshmen walking towards the arrows, most with wide eyes and unsure expressions. Emil figured he might as well be that type of person if it wasn't for the fact that Lukas had told him where to go before arriving.

On the way to the registration room, Emil heard what sounded like a family bickering and yelling to one another. Upon closer inspection, he heard that whatever they were saying was in some sort of Chinese. Leon spoke Chinese—Cantonese to be specific. Coincidentally enough, when he turned in the direction of the noise, he saw none other than Leon and his family fighting over who was going to carry what to Leon's dorm.

"You don't even know where the dorm is!" Leon snarled, stamping his foot. "Just freaking wait here until I come back with the stupid packet, and *then* we can settle in!"

"Hey, Leon," Emil said from behind. In an instant, Leon went from being impatient and cranky to calm and slightly irritated when he heard his friend's voice.

"Emil," he smiled, "did you just come?"

"Yeah. Lukas is meeting up with my parents. We took two cars since, you know, he still has to

move into the grad school."

"Uh-huh. So, like, are you going to register right now?"

"Yep."

"Cool," Leon said and pushed his friend back onto the walkway. "Let's go then. I can't stand being around Yao any longer."

When Emil looked back, he noticed Yao was wearing a distant, longing look; it was similar to the look he saw on his own parents when Lukas went off to college for the first time. It was strange knowing Yao would do the same considering Cheng and Mei had also gone through the same process. Maybe it was because Leon was the last child. Emil was, too, but there was only him and his brother.

"So they all came, huh?" Emil asked as he walked alongside his friend.

Leon blew back some of his bangs and tossed his head. "Pfft. Yeah. Yao insisted that he had to come so the room would have good fengshui or some crap like that. Mei just wanted to see the university again. Would have been nice if it was just Cheng and me."

"Oh." Emil chuckled. "I guess it was harder to talk about stuff when it was all four of you, huh?"

"Tell me about it," his friend pouted. "At least you got to go in two cars so you could, like, talk with Lukas by yourself."

"We didn't talk about too many things."

"No?"

"Not really." Emil didn't want to bring up what Lukas said about safe sex. He was afraid Leon would tease him about it for weeks to come before he finally stopped.

Eventually, the signs came to a stop in front of a housing room normally used for indoor recreational events. Today, however, the entire area was cleared and set up with tables, upperclassmen volunteers, and neon-colored packets. There were also some pens and planners handed out for the incoming freshman.

The entire registration process was just as Emil and Leon's family had described: basically, the residential assistants (a.k.a. RA's to everyone on-campus) looked for their names on a list to make sure the students arrived, handed them some contract forms, gave them some complimentary key rings, planners, and other various accessories, and pointed them in the direction of their halls.

Since Lukas and Mei had been fairly recent graduates of Eliatha University's undergraduate school, they had told Emil and Leon which hall was the best to dorm in.

"Oh, oh, live in Topaz!" Mei had told Leon when he had been registering with Emil. "It's the best! It has the best view of the pond, and it's close to the gardens."

"Live in Sapphire," Lukas had said. "It's the closest one to your classes and the library."

"No!" Mathias, Lukas' childhood friend, had shouted. "Live in Ruby! It's the closest to the gym, and plus it's right next to the girls' dorms so you can—*haccck!*" He had then been interrupted by Lukas pulling on his collar.

"Why not Opal?" Cheng had suggested. While he had not been in Eliatha University for some time, the hall he had lived in was still around. "It's in the middle so it's of equal distance to everything. The view is not half-bad, either."

So, Emil and Leon had ultimately decided on Opal Hall. During their orientation, they had stayed in the hall, too, and had agreed that it was the nicest hall out of the others. The best part was that it was also closest to the dining commons so if they ever needed a quick snack, it was barely only a minute away on the ground floor.

"Looks like nothing's changed, huh?" Leon smirked as he and Emil walked up to the hall.

"Yeah." Emil recognized the familiar coating of pearly white against the outline of the building. He could see a few students setting boxes around their windows from the outside, and parents walking in and out of the main doors. There were also volunteers with trolleys and carts going back and forth from the elevators, and there were others responsible for guiding lost students and parents to their correct dorms.

Prior to coming here, Emil and Leon had registered to live on the top floor so no one from above could disturb them. While it might have been a longer walk up and down from the ground floor, they also had the best view of the campus grounds as well as an ideal room for sleeping in.

"Okay, so, like, once we find out where our room is, we can go get the others and our stuff," Leon said. Emil nodded and went with his friend into the hall. Since the elevators were at an all-time usage, they decided to take the stairs. Half way there, Leon decided to make things interesting by holding a race—which he undeniably won due to his greater stamina and endurance.

"No...fair..." Emil panted when he finally reached the top. "You didn't...tell me when we were...starting."

"Ice, you need to start working on your muscles," Leon smirked and jogged down the hall and past the other students. He didn't even bother waiting for Emil to catch up.

When Emil finally met up with his friend, Leon had already gone inside and looked around.

"I'm calling top bunk," he said.

Emil wasn't too happy with his friend's claim. "*I* want the top bunk." Instead of apologizing or considering his preferences, Leon poked his head out from the top and stuck out his tongue.

"Too bad, so sad," he taunted him. "Maybe if you won the race, you could have called it."

"That's not fair," Emil frowned. "You didn't even tell me when the race was starting, and you know I'm not as fast as you."

"That's why I knew I could get the top bunk."

Emil could only shake his head in disbelief. There was no point in arguing or hanging around so he turned and left to retrieve his family. Leon followed shortly after, but he was too upset with him to speak.

Back when Lukas had been an undergraduate freshman, he had the pleasure of rooming with Mathias. How he had come to agree to it, Emil still couldn't understand, but he remembered Lukas had claimed the top bunk much to Mathias' disappointment.

"With the top bunk, you don't have to worry about the other one looking in on your business," he

had explained to his brother. "It also means you don't have to worry about being disturbed by the other person going up and down—you'll be the one doing it. Also, if the support fails, you'll crush the bottom person, not the other way around."

Emil didn't want to think about crushing Leon from above. That was too morbid to think about. The other conveniences, though, sounded like a good thing. During the orientation, Leon had also claimed the top bunk leaving Emil stuck on the bottom. That had only been one night, though. This would be for the entire year.

When the friends returned to the unloading area, everyone had gotten everything out of their vehicles and were waiting on confirmations that they had registered.

"Jialong, what took you guys so long?" Yao snapped. "I'm getting hungry, and you made us wait outside in the sun for too long!"

"Stupid old man," Leon muttered. Emil knew how much he loathed being called his Chinese name. "We were busy trying to see where our dorm was. You guys are all following us, right?"

"We don't want to make two trips," Lukas spoke. "Just hurry up. I have to move in before Mathias gets to the school."

"Right, right." With that, Leon led the way with their families trailing behind them.

When everyone arrived at the entrance of their dorm, Leon politely offered Emil to set his own things down before his family moved in.

"Trust me, it's going to get hectic," he whispered to his friend.

"Emil, which bunk is yours?" Lukas asked as he was carrying his brother's bed sheets.

"Bottom," Leon answered before Emil could reply.

Lukas raised an eyebrow. "I thought you wanted the top bunk, Emil."

"I did," Emil growled, throwing a dark glare at his friend, "before *someone* decided to claim it during an unfair race."

"Leon, is that true?" Cheng asked, looking at him.

Leon, in turn, averted his gaze away and pursed his lips. "Maybe," he confessed, "but I want the top bunk, too."

"Leon." Cheng placed a hand on his shoulder. "You've always said you were the mature one in your friendship, haven't you? If Emil wants to have the top bunk, then you should let him. From what I remember, you also had the top bunk during your orientation."

"Yeah, but this'll be for the entire year..." Leon muttered.

"Leon..."

Emil saw the look in Cheng's eyes. He wasn't able to give it a name, but whenever he used that look, Leon always ended up giving in regardless of the situation.

"Fine," he sighed. "Emil gets top bunk."

Lukas blinked. "Very well," he said and tossed the bed sheets over the rail. "Emil, hand me your

puffin."

Emil flinched. "You—! Lukas, you weren't supposed to tell anyone I brought it!"

"Ah, you told Lukas, not your dear big brother," he teased.

"Stupid!" Emil growled.

"Boys, knock it off," their father scolded them. "Not in front of Leon's family."

Both of them shut their mouths and silently continue unloading with Leon's family watching and waiting in amusement. After some time, they had moved all of their things inside the room and stepped out.

"Have fun and take care, Emil," his mother gently smiled.

"Study hard," his father told him.

"I will," Emil grumbled as his brother patted his head.

"If you need anything, call me," he said. "You remember how to get to the grad school, right?"

"Yes," Emil said through his teeth, "now go. I thought you wanted to get there before Mathias moved in."

As his family left, Emil heard his father saying, "I don't understand why you don't get along with that Køhler kid still. He's a nice guy."

Then, it was Leon's turn. Like a silent gun going off, everyone suddenly burst into the dorm and threw boxes after boxes on top of each other. Yao started unpacking Leon's study lamp and other assorted school supplies and stuffed them into his desk. Mei was busy setting Leon's bed making sure all of the corners were nicely tucked and secure. Cheng was unpacking some of Leon's posters that he had brought from home, asking where he wanted certain ones.

Within a matter of minutes, all of Leon's things were unpacked and organized, all of the boxes emptied and stacked.

"Thanks, guys, I guess," Leon said and shooed Yao out of the room.

"You're really not going to take us to the E.C.?" Yao asked.

"D.C.," Leon sighed, "and no, I don't want you here. Mei and Cheng are cool, but you mess with my aura."

"What aura?" Yao huffed. "I made sure your room has proper fengshui! The least you can do is be thankful! Young people nowadays!"

"Now, now, I think we should give the boys some space," Cheng quickly suggested and urged Yao out of the dorm. "We don't have to use Leon's meal tickets if you'd like. We can always pay ourselves."

Yao did not sound too happy about paying for his own meal—especially since Leon had plenty of meals left to go. Nevertheless, his family bid him farewell and left, too, just like Emil's family.

"Geez," Leon sighed when they were finally out of sight. "Looks like we can't eat just yet."

"Guess not," Emil chuckled and threw himself on his unmade bed. He wished his brother and parents were as lively as Leon's family sometimes. As he stared at the wall opposite of him, he saw Leon's kung-fu movie posters practically painting the walls into a different color. All Emil had were some banners of Eliatha University's mascot: a black dragon. If it wasn't because the university was known for its academics, it was known for its standout mascot and design.

"Hey, Emil," his friend suddenly spoke up from the bottom bunk.

"Yeah?"

"We're in college now."

## Chapter End Notes

The title of this series, "Collage Diaries," is in relation to an event in which one of my old roommates made a collage out of condoms on our dormitory walls. It can also be a misinterpreted as "College Diaries" since in this alternate universe, the main characters, Hong Kong and Iceland, are now in college.



## Chapter 2

Barely three hours into settling down, Emil and Leon received a knock on their front door.

"Yo, like, open up, dudes!" someone with a particularly sassy voice called from the other side. As the two roommates exchanged dubious looks, they proceeded to peep through the door viewer.

Since he was slightly quicker to judge, Leon went first and stared at the person on the other side. Emil watched his friend as he made a face and tilted his head towards the door viewer, urging him to take a look.

When Emil looked through, he was equally as confused: the person on the other side was a blonde, green-eyed eccentric wearing a hot pink shirt complete with a plaid skirt. Something was a little off, though, Emil thought. Maybe it was the fact that the person's chest was unusually flat for such a getup, or maybe it was because there was a slight dip in the speaker's voice. Whatever it was, Leon and Emil weren't sure if the person outside was a boy or a girl.

"Hey, like, open up, you two!" the person spoke again. "I know you're inside! We're having a floor meeting in, like, five minutes so be there or be square!"

"Look who's talking," Leon muttered, rolling his eyes with a mocking smirk.

"Shut up," Emil hissed and pushed him out of the way to open the door. It's a good thing he did, too, because it looked like the blonde was about to leave.

"So you *were* inside!" the person exclaimed. Before either roommate could say anything, they were given a full inspection of the eccentric clad-in-pink individual as he walked circles around them. The way in which he did it was no different than a lioness encircling her prey.

"Like, you two've got good chemistry." Then, the person stuck out both hands in a crisscross pattern for the boys to shake. "So, like, I'm Feliks. Feliks Łukasiewicz." Neither Leon nor Emil dared to address this person by his surname.

"Anyway," Feliks continued, "I'm your R.A. this year so get used to seeing me and lots of pink, okay?"

"Uh..." Emil was at a loss for words.

"So you're a dude?" Leon straight-up asked.

"Leon!"

"I get that a lot," the resident assistant scoffed. "But you really should check it before you wreck it."

"What...?" Emil whispered. Suddenly he wasn't sure he was too happy about living on the fifth floor anymore.

Then, Feliks pointed a finger (complete with neon pink nail polish on his nail) at the two boys.

"But don't forget what I said. Meeting in five."

"Got it," Leon smirked, giving his friend a light nudge.

"What?" Emil asked when their R.A. was out of sight knocking on other doors.

"Think he's gay?"

Emil only shrugged. "How should I know? Does it matter?"

"I'll bet he's friends with a lot of girls," Leon smirked. "If we get tight with him, we can get introduced to all sorts of ladies."

"Leon, we're here for an education, not to goof off and flirt," Emil sneered. His friend responded by locking him in a chokehold and messing up his silvery hair.

"Aw, you're starting to sound like your brother," he smirked. "Don't tell me I have to start acting like Mathias then."

"That doesn't make sense!" the helpless Emil snarled as he struggled to loosen his aggressor's grip. "Besides, acting like Mathias never solves anything!"

"Whatever it did, it got him into law school," Leon pointed out.

"That's only because his uncle is the dean of the health and social sciences department!"

"Oh yeah." Then, Leon released his friend from under his arm and straightened him out. "So, like, are we going to the meeting?"

Emil furrowed his eyebrows. "He never told us where to go, did he?"

"It's probably going to be, like, in the lounge area or something."

"Makes sense," Emil agreed and followed him to the open area by the elevators.

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"Okay, so, like, is everyone here?" Feliks asked as the students gathered around him in a clustered donut shape. "Whatever. Snooze, you lose. Anyways, there's going to be a party for the freshmeats only because you're cool like that. By the Gold Hall. Be there. Lots of fun. Oh, yeah, and it's from nine to midnight. Moving on. If you ever need to talk to someone or just need a shoulder to cry on, I'm *not* your guy—just kidding. I'd totally be there for you, freshmeats."

The little joke earned the resident assistant some chuckles among the crowd. Leon whispered into Emil's ear asking him if they wanted to go grab something at the dining commons before heading over to the party.

"Oh!" Feliks suddenly cried before Emil could give him his answer. "I almost forgot! You all, like, have to introduce yourselves. I don't know. Just go in a circle or a zigzag or something. I'll start first—and just so you know, I know there's thirty two of you in my wing so I'll be counting to make sure no one was skipped. Okay? Okay."

"So, like, I'm Feliks Łukasiewicz. I'm a junior, but I should be the only junior besides the other R.A. on this floor. I'm a fashion design major. Pretty obvious, don't you think?"

"Like, totally," Leon whispered with a sassy voice. Emil elbowed him.

After Feliks made his introduction, all of the residents went around telling everyone their full names and majors. Once all thirty two of them finished introducing his or herself, Feliks clapped his hands together and brought the floor meeting to a conclusion.

"Alright, that settles it!" he beamed. "Now you're all free to run along! Don't forget about the party at Gold! I'll be there! Ooh, but if you're free, I'm going to eat dinner so you're welcome to tag

along!"

Emil was about to retreat back into his room so he could clean up the rest of his boxes when Leon snagged him by his shirt.

"Hey, where do you think you're going, Ice?" he asked. "Feliks is going down to eat. Come on. I'm starving."

"But I was going to..." Emil's voice trailed off. "Fine. I'm coming."

As the boys followed behind Feliks, they noticed the flashy pink-stylized R.A. had already attracted a small group of girls who were asking him about what sorts of clothes he designed.

"See, what'd I tell ya?" Leon chuckled. "He's a chick-magnet just like I thought he'd be."

"Please don't invite any of them over," Emil groaned. "I want to get a good night's sleep, thank you very much."

"Relax, I won't," Leon laughed. "Though I kind of want to check out Topaz Hall later—you know—since it's separate gender and all."

It was true. While Opal Hall was a co-educational dorm, Topaz and Ruby Halls were separated by gender. Lukas had been dragged over to Ruby Hall several times with Mathias, and he said the experience had been unbearable. According to him, since there was no sign of a womanly figure to be found in the dorms, the bathrooms were said to be a mess, and there was always a peculiar odor in the air. It didn't help that just about every dorm blasted music and echoed with screams and manly yelling every three seconds.

Topaz Hall, on the other hand, was said to be rather mellow—at least when it came to the girls' dorms. Mei, Leon's cousin, had lived there when she had been a freshman. She had told him that the rooms were generally quiet, and the ladies weren't afraid to travel to one another's dorms to borrow something or just to make small talk. It hadn't been the most efficient studying environment, but it was certainly more livable than Ruby Hall.

There was a total of four dining services located in Eliatha University. The main dining commons and the largest of them all was the Bonnefoy Dining Commons named after the generous French donors who provided the funds for construction and constant renovations time and time again. It was there that most students would go to eat and study for long periods of time—if they could handle the smells and noise.

Second in line of biggest dining commons was Hatches, an odd cross between a café, sandwich deli, and bakery. It was located in the center of the classroom buildings where students with breaks in between classes could stop by for a quick snack.

Then there was Pea Pots, an eatery that was fashioned more like a grocery store than an actual place to eat. Most students referred to the place as the "hippies' D.C." since it offered a variety of organic foods and fresh produce from the farmlands in the countryside.

Lastly, there was the Kirkland Kart. Honestly, no one knew why it existed. If there was ever to be a stain on the polished gem that was Eliatha University, the Kirkland Kart was it. It couldn't even be called an eatery let alone a real dining common. It was basically a cart that whimsically travelled around campus grounds for anyone (un)fortunate to be hungry enough to come across it. Contrary to its name, the Kirkland Kart didn't serve British food entirely; there were all sorts of strange soups and boxed salads to be offered, and anyone brave enough could fancy some of the

Kirkland's one-of-a-kind black-bean midnight tea.

The tea was supposed to be a brew of coffee and tea leaves mixed in one for an increased caffeine intake, but that was only if one managed to finish the entire thing. Naturally, it had been known that whoever could finish the black-bean midnight tea grande had a true iron-shell stomach. News of anyone finishing the concoction in a single sitting spread like wildfire across the campus, and in time, it was known that whoever managed to finish it had their name etched into the Kirkland Kart's blackboard for the rest of the year as a running joke. Just last year, only one student by the name of Alfred F. Jones had managed to finish it. Only one.

But, for now, Leon and Emil wouldn't have to worry about encountering the mysterious traveling Kirkland Kart because it always closed down at sunset, and the sun had long since gone down from the sky. When the students approached the Bonnefoy Dining Commons, the entire building was glowing with warm electric lights and equally warm colors from the inside.

Emil recalled Mathias praising the interior design of the school's dining commons—something that was rare to hear. He may have claimed he could do a better job, but for a Frenchman's taste, the décor was suitably appropriate.

"Okay, ladies," Feliks said as he turned around. "I know you've all probably been here during orientation, but I'm going to welcome you to the B.D.C., anyway! Welcome!"

Leon and Emil casually blended into the background as their floor mates cheered and clapped at their resident assistant's enthusiasm. After giving his residents a brief rundown and his own recommendations, Feliks went off and let everyone pick out their own dishes.

The main dining commons was set up in such a way that it wasn't like a cafeteria but a buffet, as one would call it. So as long as that particular item was still available, students could grab whatever they wanted as long as they didn't leave the premises. An extra charge was administered for students taking food out of the dining commons, but for the most part, there were plenty of other opportunities to eat on the go.

"Remember," Leon said as they grabbed their plates, "don't get the Asian stuff."

Emil grimaced and silently nodded recalling their incoming orientation. When he and Leon had eaten together at the dining commons for the first time, Leon had made it a personal goal to sample everything the university had to offer on that day. He had heard the warnings from Mei and Cheng about the oriental section not being the best place to eat from, but nevertheless, he had tried it anyway. The evening had not ended well.

"Like, now that I think about it, it's just a given," Leon said as he helped himself to some pasta. "No matter what, you're never going to eat Asian food as good as mine, yeah?"

Emil had to agree there. After being invited to his friend's house on several occasions for dinner, he couldn't bring himself to imagine eating out at a restaurant ever again. None of them could compare to Leon's family's cooking.

After getting their food, the two found Feliks and the rest of their floor mates chatting about... whatever it was girls and a quirky resident assistant could chat about. When they sat down, they noticed there was someone new joining them at the table.

"Hey, fellas!" Feliks greeted them as they took their seats next to the new person. Unlike Feliks who was as colorful as Leon and Emil had seen so far in Eliatha University, this person was rather plain. Aside his bashful appearance, he had plain brown hair that went to his shoulders complete

with plain green eyes. He never bothered to speak out of turn when Feliks straight up slapped his back and ordered him to scoot over for the boys.

"Oh, like, this guy here is Toris," he said, his mouth filled with what appeared to be brownies and ice cream. Now that Leon and Emil were next to them, it looked the only thing he was eating was dessert. "Toris is the other R.A. on our floor. His room is right next to mine, so if I'm not around, just go to him if you need something."

"Nice to meet you guys," he softly smiled. "So what're your names?"

"Emil," Emil flatly said.

"Leon Wang," Leon replied. "So did you two, like, know each other before becoming R.A.s? Looks like you two have a little history."

"Oh, that," Toris chuckled. "We went to high school together."

"Same here," Leon said pointing to his friend. "Which high school?"

"Academy W. It's sort of a strange private school."

"No way, like, that's where Emil and I went."

"Really?" Emil noticed Toris was starting to loosen up. Leave it to Leon to know how to make small talk with someone. "I don't think I ever saw you two."

"Eh, we hung out in weird areas," Leon smirked earning some "Oohs," from the girls. To make Emil feel better, he also added, "But I transferred there my sophomore year, so there was also that." While Leon continued to talk to the resident assistant, Emil received some questions from the unoccupied ladies.

"So Emil, how long have you and Leon known each other?" one of them asked.

"Since high school," he said between bites. He attempted to eat as often but as carefully as possible hoping they would ignore him and lean towards Leon some more.

"Aw, so you guys decided to room together?" another giggled. "How sweet."

Why was it sweet? Emil wondered. It wasn't like he and Leon were a couple. They just happened to be two friends who got into the same school. He thought that sort of occurrence was just normal. Was it the aura they gave off, perhaps?

"Emil, is that your natural hair color?" someone else asked.

Emil nodded this time since he thought it would be rude if he answered with his mouth full. He got that question a lot, anyway.

"And your eyes are also natural."

Emil nodded again.

"What about Leon's?"

Emil nodded once more. While he thought himself to be the more exotic of the two, it was true that Leon's golden shade of amber eyes didn't fail to capture the interest of someone every now and then. Leon, however, didn't mind the attention.

"Hey, so Emil, what's your major?"

"Marine biology," he said. No interesting reactions there. He suspected if he told them he was going into pre-med like his brother had, he might have sparked their interest.

"Oh. That's cool. What about Leon?"

"Business management."

"That makes sense," one of them giggled. "He plays the part."

Emil shrugged in a sort of agreement. Since his standoffishness had earned him low marks, the girls eventually wavered towards Leon—him being the more sociable of the two, apparently.

When dinner was finished, Feliks took off with the rest of the girls to "dress for success," as he had put it. Leon and Emil only rolled their eyes and returned to the security of their dorms.

"That Feliks guy's kind of funky, huh?" Leon commented as he dug through his box of accessories.

"In what way?" Emil responded considering there were several angles Feliks was "funky."

"Like, he's a little outdated with his lingo, but he keeps it fresh *because* it's outdated."

"That kind of stuff never made sense to me," Emil shrugged.

"You should be more outgoing, Ice. You left me trying to juggle all of them at once."

"They weren't interesting, anyway." Emil paused to tie his shoes. "They're all weird majors. No wonder they got in this school."

"*Psh*," Leon scoffed. "Since when is marine biology a normal major? I'd be surprised if you found more than twenty freshman on campus majoring in that."

"I could have gone into medicine, too, you know," Emil frowned. "I just thought it'd be awkward since Lukas is doing the same thing. He'd probably guide me through everything in baby steps like high school."

"Makes sense, I suppose." While Mei and Cheng had gone to Eliatha University, too, they had majored in completely different things: Mei had double-majored in nutritional sciences and fashion design while Cheng had double-majored in applied mathematics with an emphasis in probability and statistics as well as philosophy.

"Anyway," Leon sighed, "are you ready, yet? It's almost ten."

"*What?*" Emil cried in shock. "Already? But the party started at nine! We're going to be an hour late!"

"Ice, Ice, Ice," his friend chuckled. "Don't you know the rules to attendance? Always show up late. That's when things really start getting wild."

"How?"

"Because if you show up too early, chances are, nothing's really getting started, and before you know it, you'll be stuck with the self-conscious losers for the rest of the party since, you know, they get familiar with you. Arrive too late, and all the cool guys get taken. Geez, and I thought you and Mathias were tight."

Emil furrowed his eyebrows. "Not really. He was just someone who was there, and he was someone who always brought the party with him late or not—but he was always on time, I think."

"I'm not an idiot loud-mouth like Mathias, but I *really* hope you don't stay a wallflower like your brother for the rest of college, Ice."

"I won't be a wallflower because I'm going to be sticking with you, right?" Emil asked just to make sure Leon wasn't going to ditch him halfway into the night.

"Eh..." Leon was hesitating. That wasn't a good sign. "Yeah. Uh-huh. Just...make sure you don't do or say anything stupid while we're there, okay?"

"When do I ever?"

"No, I wasn't saying you do. I just want to make sure I establish myself. Eliatha University is full of ambitious students—people with drive. If I get in with the right people, I can carry those connections all the way through graduation. You can make sure you don't get in the way, can't you?"

"I guess," Emil sighed. "Alright, then. I'm ready."

"Great," Leon smirked and wrapped his arm around him. "Let's go."

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

If Emil had been familiar with old-school street lingo, he might have said something like, "This party is pumpin'."

...Something like that.

On the contrary, Emil Steilsson was no old-school street boy, nor was he extroverted enough to say something so colloquial. Instead, right after arriving at the party, he immediately looked for a secluded area to sit down at and hide himself away. Forget about Leon and his social connections charm. He would be just fine on his own. He figured his friend at better things to do than to get weighed down by an awkward introvert.

It wasn't like there was any reason to complain. Parties, he suspected, were just like this: people talking and dancing, socialization going on around, idiots doing stupid stuff—a typical college atmosphere. No wonder why Lukas had hated it.

But the music was decent and new, the food and drinks were served at a comfortable rate, and the freshmeat was all gathered at the same location. What could go wrong?

"Hey, you!" someone said. Emil paid no attention. Whoever was speaking had to have been talking to someone else. Another girl, perhaps. The one speaking was a girl, no doubt. Emil didn't know any girls so he ignored her.

"You with the white hair!"

Now that was funny. Emil didn't know anyone else with white hair except for some instructor's wildly artistic nephew. Was someone talking to him, or was there someone else with white hair in the area?

Curiosity got the better of him, and Emil looked up.

"Yeah, you!" someone giggled. She was a regular lady, from the looks of it: pigtails, bright smile, friendly eyes... The only thing off about her was her almost tropical appearance. Her dress was a flashy aquamarine blue (Emil recalled the color from a crayon name) and her skin was as dark as his skin was pale. But forget about her appearance; she was making eye contact with him. This was unfamiliar. He only received eye contact when someone was ready to call him out or make fun of him—like a certain Cantonese friend of his.

"Are you talking to me?" he asked considering there was no one else who fit her description.

"Of course, silly!" she laughed. "Who else has white hair around here? Is it natural?"

"Yeah." Emil shifted awkwardly into the wall. He didn't enjoy direct confrontations with people. That was Leon's job. Speaking of which, where in Eliatha was he?

"That's so cool," the girl breathed. "I don't think I've ever heard of someone having white hair as their natural color—except for that one professor's brother..."

"Oh." He didn't bother telling her there was someone else he knew with white hair, too, though he



was wondering who this professor's brother was. Obviously the music instructor's nephew he knew about was way too young to be a professor—art prodigy or not.

"So where are you from?" the girl asked.

"Local Eliathan," he replied and shortly added, "but I'm originally from Iceland." He was hoping this person was getting the hint that he didn't want to be talked to. He thought the short-worded answers should have hit home by now.

But, she continued to talk. "I'm actually studying abroad here," she said.

Emil suspected he was supposed to ask her what country she was from, but he simply replied with another "Oh."

"Seychelles," she specified. "You know where that is?"

"No." It was the truth.

She laughed. "That's okay. Most people don't know. It's like this little island off of Africa. Sometimes they forget to put us on the map. It's kind of sad."

"I can get that." Having been from an Icelandic background, Emil's country of origin was sometimes forgotten on the map of Europe. Iceland was an island, too. He thought that if he mentioned these facts, he might have been able to strike up a conversation with her.

But, instead, he fumbled out with the boring, typical question of "So what's your name?"

"I'm Michelle," the girl smiled, sticking out her hand. Strange of her to be doing something usually reserved for men, but Emil shook her hand, anyway.

"Emil," he said. When he took his hand away, he realized how frustratingly hot and sweaty it was. He hoped she hadn't been too grossed out by his nervous wreck of a handshake.

*What would Leon do?* he wondered. He predicted his friend would be the type to hit it off with a joke, but Emil was anything but a walking joke book.

"Umm..." Pushing those thoughts away, instead Emil sputtered out yet another dull question. "So what's your major?"

"Marine biology," Michelle said. "And you?"

"Same, actually." Honestly, he was surprised he would meet any freshmen with the same major as him—and a girl at that.

"Ooh, that's wonderful!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "So which hall do you live in? Er, you live on-campus, right?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "Opal Hall."

"Oh." Her expression fell a little. "I live in Topaz."

"My friend's cousin lived there," Emil said, referring to Mei. "She said the girls' dorms are really nice."

"They are," she agreed. "Everyone's really friendly. They're helping me with my English."

"That's...nice." Honestly he had no idea what to say. When she mentioned that, however, he noticed she was speaking with a slight accent. What was it? British? French? Somewhere in between? He couldn't put his finger on it.

"Back at Seychelles, we would speak with French and English," Michelle explained. Ah. So he was right in a sense. "It's really different from what the other countries in Africa speak, but we manage somehow."

"You sound fine to me," Emil said, hoping he didn't sound too sappy when he told her that.

"Oh...Th-Thank you." Was that a blush he saw? He was wondering if he made her blush. Just thinking about it made him want to blush, too. He felt like an idiot.

"Ice!"

"Thank the gods..." Emil muttered under his breath. It was Leon here to save the awkward train wreck of a conversation.

"I was looking all over for you," he said as he came over with what appeared to be a plastic cup of fizzy punch. "Hey, so, like, I met some people who were going to show me around Ruby Hall after talking with some other people. I'm just letting you know if you wanna head on back to the dorms or something—so you don't go wondering where I went." He then stopped to look over at Emil's new acquaintance. "Oh, hey you hooked up with my roommate. Is he being awkward like he usually is?"

"Shut up, Leon," Emil hissed. Fortunately, Michelle seemed unfazed by any of this.

"I'm Leon, Emil's roommate," he introduced himself. "You?"

"Michelle," she timidly said.

"Cool. So where're you from?"

"Seychelles," she replied. "You've probably never heard of it."

"Oh, yeah, I know that place," Leon grinned. "It's that one little island off of Africa, right?"

"Yes! But how would you...?"

"My friend, here, is in a same situation." To emphasis his point, Leon patted Emil's shoulder. Emil replied by shrugging him off. "See, he's Icelandic. Over in Europe, they sometimes forget to put Iceland on the map. I think I heard something about how Africa does the same in Seychelles, am I right?"

"Uh-huh," Michelle nodded. Terrific. Leon was able to make the connection that Emil failed at.

Then, Leon smiled. "I'm Cantonese—from Hong Kong to be exact. It's not, like, a place people would forget about since we were part of Britain and all, but it's an island like Iceland and Seychelles. Pretty cool, huh? We're from different parts of the world, too."

"That *is* pretty cool," Michelle agreed. Emil simply grunted. By now, he was sure he had dissolved into the background, but, as his odd luck would have it, his friend trailed away and left them to each other again.

"You two seem to hit it off pretty well," he said. "I'll just leave you guys to do your thing, then. Ice,

"I'll just meet you back at the dorm, okay?"

"Sure," he replied. "Bye."

"See ya," his friend waved and vanished into the freshmeat sea.

When he didn't see him anymore, Emil could only groan and drown in his misfortunes. Without his friend around, there was definitely no point in staying at the party regardless of what other people he might have met. He thought it would be best to call off his conversation with Michelle; if she was the same major as him, he figured they would be seeing each other in their classes eventually.

"Um, listen," he began, "I think I'm going to head on back to my dorm. It's late, and I only came here because my roommate just now dragged me over."

"Oh," Michelle blinked. "Sure. It was nice meeting you. Hey, um, one last thing: what classes are you taking this term?"

Emil paused to run over his schedule. "Bio, general chem, and beginner culinary class. I know the last one's kind of out there."

"I'm taking biology and culinary, too!" she beamed. "Maybe we'll see each other in our classes?"

"Maybe." He really didn't know if he would be able to help her in culinary class if not biology. The only reason he was taking it was to get his electives out of the way—that and to try surpassing Leon in cooking. He hated it when Leon bragged about his family's cooking skills.

"I'll see you when classes start, then," Michelle smiled.

Emil smiled back. "Yeah. See you there perhaps. Night."

"Good night," she responded back.

Great. He was out of there. The atmosphere was positively suffocating. He hated the crowds and the noise. How Leon had been able to put up with it in Hong Kong, he would never know. When he was finally away from Gold Hall's quad, he headed straight back to Opal Hall when he heard his phone vibrate.

"Big Brother," his contact read. Emil frowned every time he saw that title. Since his parents had refused to buy him anything but a disposable phone (due to his lack of social interactions), Lukas had been kind enough to buy him a smartphone—on the condition that he would list his phone number under "Big Brother."

From an objective point of view, having a smartphone was better than refusing to call Lukas "Big Brother," but he could have done without that.

Groaning, he answered the phone. "Hello?"

"I don't hear any background noise," his brother's emotionless voice said. "So you're not at the party."

Emil frowned. "I was."

"But you left early," his brother accurately concluded. "I'd say you were there for barely an hour."

He was right on that assumption. To save himself the trouble of denying it, Emil told the truth. "I was there for about forty minutes. It was boring."

"Even with that Asian kid?"

"His name is Leon," Emil reminded him with a sour look on his face.

"Was he your only friend there?"

"He left me." He immediately regretted saying that. Knowing how protective Lukas could get, he was really getting out of line.

Lukas clicked his tongue. "He did, did he? You know, I can get Mathias' uncle to throw you a special recommendation for a single room. You don't have to live with that guy if you don't want to."

"*Leon*," Emil sighed. "And, no, I don't want to live in a single. It's too expensive. You lived with Mathias, too—for a time."

"Mathias and I go farther back than you and Leon." At least Lukas was using his friend's name now. "You've only known Leon for a little over two years. How long do you think it's going to be before he steals something or starts selling drugs to the students?"

"Leon's not that type of person, Lukas."

A pause. "I thought I heard some static in the phone," his older brother teased.

Emil rolled his eyes. "Leon's a good person, *Brother*."

"That's better. I suppose if you're happy, it's fine. Just call me if something goes wrong, alright?"

"Yes," he grunted. He was almost to his hall. He thought it would be better to take the stairs since he figured it would be the only exercise he would get all year. "Is that all you have to say?"

"Oh, yes. Have you met anyone else—besides your R.A., I mean?"

"Um....There was this girl. Michelle, I think her name was. She's a marine biology major, too."

"A girl, huh?" Through the unusual silence, Emil thought he heard his brother say something like, "Beats having a brother-in-law."

"Leon. And I. Are not. A thing."

"Sure you aren't. But if this Michelle person is smart, be her friend. It's nice to have smart friends."

"You're one to talk," Emil frowned. "You didn't have any friends besides Mathias."

"I was the smartest one in the undergraduate program. Of course I wouldn't have any use for friends."

"So you're doubting my abilities?"

"No. I thought it would be nice to have a change of pace for once. You're in college now, little brother. Try something different for a change. If not for you, do it for me."

Where was this coming from? Since being born, Emil always knew Lukas to be someone who cared deeply for him no matter what his views of the world were. He should have understood that his dear little brother didn't want to interact with the world if he could. So why was he encouraging socialization if he didn't do it, himself?

*Maybe he wants me to do the things he couldn't do?* he thought.

"Uh...Lu—Brother, I'm at my dorm now," he said wanting to cut the phone call short. "I think I'm going to take a shower. I'll talk to you later."

"What time do your classes end on Thursday?" his brother suddenly asked.

"Why?"

"So I can call and ask you about them."

Emil sighed again. "Four. I only have culinary on Thursday."

"Alright. Tell me how that goes, then."

"Uh-huh."

"Goodnight, little brother."

"Goodnight..." Emil cringed. "...Big Brother."

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Leon didn't come back for another three hours. In the time he had been gone, Emil had already finished getting ready for bed, and was just about to fall asleep when he heard a small group of voices drifted into his dorm.

"Aw, sweet, so this is your room? It's way better than the ones at Gold." Oh. So these were different new "friends" of Leon's then, if they weren't from Ruby Hall.

"Cool yeah?" Emil heard Leon say. "Oh, wait. Quiet. I think my roommate's sleeping."

Part of Emil wanted to sit there and ignore the noise. Another part of him wanted to lean over and see what kind of people Leon had invited over from Ruby Hall. If he didn't see them right now, he probably wouldn't see them again.

"It's alright," he grumbled as he leaned over the railing on his bunk. "I'm awake."

"Interesting," one of them with wavy golden-brown hair commented. "He looks rather exotic. How'd you end up with someone like him, Leon?"

"High school," Leon shortly answered. "If you didn't see it from the signs on our doors, his name's Emil. Emil, this is Charles\*\* and Yong Soo."

The names and appearances were incredibly contrasting. Emil had to suspect the one with wavy hair was Charles and the tall Asian-looking one next to him was Yong Soo.

"Nice to meet you," he said. The others nodded in return.

"Charles is an economics major," Leon said. "Yong Soo's a computer science major."

"Cool," was all Emil could think of to say.

The one named Charles spoke. "Listen, Leon, I hate to be rude, but I think it's time for Yong Soo and I to take our leave. It's rather late, and I need my full night's rest for tonight." Emil had to make a face at the way he talked. He sounded like some overly pompous asshole. How someone as rebellious as Leon was able to put up with him for even more than ten minutes was a mystery.

"That's fine," Leon replied. "I'll see you around, then, yeah?"

"Yes."

"Of course."

A few short goodbyes later, the room was left with its original occupants: Leon and Emil.

Leon didn't even bother to take off his shoes as he flopped onto his bed. "Ah, geez, I'm beat. So how was your night with Michelle, Emil?"

"I sort of said goodbye to her after you left," he responded after a yawn. "There wasn't much to talk about."

His friend scoffed. "Nothing to talk about? Like, you guys are the same major. You should have asked her about why she wanted to go into marine biology or something. You know, listen to what she has to say. Girls like it when you ask them things. Anyone does. People like to talk about themselves."

"I'm not like you," Emil stubbornly grunted.

"You need to grow up." Leon took a moment to stretch. "Hey, how about tomorrow we check out the gym? We don't have any classes until next week anyway."

"Don't you have something to do with your friends?"

"Nah, they're just people I'll be able to say hi to when I walk around—the ones at Ruby, anyway. They're not as resourceful as me. Charles and Yong Soo—those two that just left—they're alright."

"Oh." Emil took this opportunity to turn around and huddle up with his stuffed puffin plushie. He was glad Lukas reminded him to bring it, but Leon didn't have to know about it.

"Uh," Leon spoke up again, "so, like, are we going to the gym tomorrow?"

"I don't know. What time?"

"How 'bout seven?"

"Seven's early," Emil groaned.

"Come on. It's going to be good. You'll feel better after going, trust me."

Finally, he gave in. "Fine, I'll go. But only if you promise not to make fun of me."

"No promises there," his friend chuckled. "Even if I'm just going to give you tips, you might take them as insults."

Emil, his eyes already shut, could only purse his lips. "Just don't do anything to embarrass me."

"Sure, sure," Leon yawned. "What a day. I'm going to sleep, okay? ...Emil?"

His friend didn't respond. Curious, Leon carefully climbed up to his bed and saw that he had fallen asleep holding his stuffed puffin.

"Huh," he smirked. "Out like a light. Night, Emil." With that, he climbed back down, changed out of his clothes, set his phone alarm to six, and fell asleep right away.

## Chapter End Notes

\*Hutt River acts like a Charles. Don't sue me.

## Chapter 4

The first thing Emil woke up to on his first official morning of college was a cold wet towel smacking his face.

"*Blargh—!*" he gasped as the freezing water dripped onto his pillow and soaked him through and through. "Leon, what in Eliatha!"

"Rise and shine, snowflake," he heard his less-than considerate roommate snicker as he caught the towel before it hit him back.

"That's not cool!" Emil exploded. "I'd never do something like that to you!"

"Yeah, but you slept past the alarm," Leon said. When Emil looked closer, he noticed Leon was already dressed in basketball shorts, running shoes, and an Eliatha University sweatshirt. The sweatshirt was actually a hand-me-down from Cheng; it was a little big, but since he always took care of his belongings, Leon didn't mind saving a few hetas by taking it with him to school. The design hadn't changed on the new sweatshirts, either.

"C'mon, Ice. Get dressed so the machines don't get taken up. Cheng and Mei told me it can get awkward waiting around for a machine to be available."

Emil wasn't able to relate since Lukas never bothered going to the gym as an undergraduate. Much like his brother, Emil was gifted with high metabolism, but as a result, it gave him the poor excuse that he didn't need to work out in order to look lean. Leon was a different case, but at least he practiced martial arts and worked out back in high school—apparently being a fanatic of all those Hong Kong action movies paid off in the long run.

"What time is it?" Emil groaned.

"Six thirty," Leon said. "I already took a shower and everything. You slept like a log while I was getting ready."

Emil glowered at his friend. "I was exhausted. Transitioning from high school to college and going to a party will do that."

"I did the same," Leon reminded him.

"Yeah, but you're used to this lifestyle by now, aren't you? You moved from Hong Kong barely two years ago.

Leon shrugged. "Maybe that's it. But anyway, hurry up and get dressed, wouldja? I don't wanna have to come up there and drag you down myself."

"I'm getting ready," Emil sighed and flung over his covers. He thought of making his bed before leaving, but since Leon was waiting and he had the top bunk, anyway, he figured it wouldn't matter if he left it undone for one day.

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Unlike Leon, Emil hadn't planned on actually going to the gym so the only thing he could manage was a large t-shirt with a loaned pair of shorts from Leon. Aside, his shoes, socks, and his undergarments, everything was borrowed from his friend. Most embarrassingly of all, the t-shirt Emil was forced to wear was something he couldn't be proud of.



"Go to hell," Leon laughed. "Now *that's* funny."

Emil groaned. According to Leon, his distant relative from Thailand gave him the shirt Emil was wearing. It consisted of a cheap white fabric with blunt stars, glittering rainbows, and pink ponies that spat fire out of their mouths. The icing on this trainwreck of a shirt was the three words at the bottom of the design labeled in brilliant rainbow font: "GO TO HELL."

"This is the stupidest thing ever..." Emil looked over at his friend who appeared to be more well-dressed than him. "You didn't have any other shirts, Leon?"

"None that I'd let you work out in," he replied. "I plan to wear the rest for, you know, college stuff, not exercising in. I thought you'd bring some gym clothes, but I guess not, huh?"

"Oh, you think?" Emil sarcastically sneered.

"Hey, don't sweat it—no pun intended," his friend laughed. "If there's anything people are going to remember you by besides your white hair, it's going to be that shirt. I was going to wear it around during parties or something, but I think it looks better on you. Wanna have it?"

"No, thanks," Emil declined. "I think I'm better off with the wardrobe I have now."

Getting back to the main subject, since Lukas had never gone to the gym, he hadn't bothered showing his little brother where it was located. Apparently it was close to Ruby Hall according to Mathias, but Emil was unsure of its whereabouts, too. So, instead he was stuck following Leon around.

On their way to the gym, Leon got a phone call.

*This early in the morning?* Emil thought. He figured Lukas was still sleeping—probably due to excessive pre-emptive studying.

"Yeah?" Leon spoke into his phone. "Hey, Cheng. Yeah. Uh-huh. Yeah, Emil and I are going to the gym right now. Don't worry, I promise I'll take care of him. I miss you, too. I—What? Yao and Mei are listening?" Leon hung his head. "Shhhhit...Fine. Put them on."

"Leeeoool!"

Emil winced. He could hear Mei's energetic voice even without the speakerphone on Leon's end.

"How's everything going?" she asked. "Did you meet anyone? Is your R.A. cool?"

"Fine, yes, and sort of," Leon answered the questions in order. "Emil and I are already settled in, and I met some people from Ruby and Gold Halls. They're pretty cool. And I think my R.A.'s gay. I think. I don't know. It doesn't matter to me, either way."

Mei's voice must've died down because Emil couldn't hear anything anymore—that was, until he heard Yao's voice speaking through the phone.

"Jialong, are you getting enough to eat?" he asked. "Are you making sure the colors in your house are coordinated?"

"I'm eating enough, Yao," Leon frowned, "and yes, I made sure the stupid plaque is facing the right way."

"Make sure you buy a plant, okay?" Yao instructed. "I want you to send me a picture of your plant

by tonight, got it? Since classes haven't started, you still have time to take the bus to go out of town. Whatever you do, don't get—"

"A bonsai," Leon sighed. "I know. You've told me a thousand times. I'll send you the picture then." He paused to point Emil in the left direction at the fork of the walkway. From there, Emil could see something that vaguely looked like a gym at the end of the road next to a red-bricked building; it must've been Ruby Hall, he assumed.

"Listen, we're almost at the gym. I'll talk to you guys later, okay? Bye, Cheng. Bye, Mei."

"What about me?!" Emil could hear his friend's guardian shout.

"Yeah, yeah, you, too, gramps," Leon groaned and hung up before he had to submit himself to anymore yelling. "Geez, that stupid guy..."

"Are you really going to buy the plant?" Emil asked with a slight smirk almost cracking between his lips.

"I have to," his friend grimaced. "If I don't, Yao's going to threaten to cancel my phone plan."

"That sucks." Emil could understand. Lukas would do the same if he found out one day his number was listed under something besides "Big Brother."

"Uh, let's see..." Leon mumbled. "I think we're going to be okay. There shouldn't be too many people. We'll see."

---

As mentioned by Mathias when he was an undergraduate student, Emil saw that the machines ran on fingerprint scans so anyone who wasn't a student couldn't use the machines.

"Are you two new?" the lady at the front desk asked.

"Yeah," Leon said. "Freshmeat." That earned him a smile from the lady.

"Alright. Just give me your ID and I'll tell you when you can register your thumbprints, okay?"

"Sure," Leon replied. Emil also nodded.

A few seconds later, after the lady had typed up their names into the registrar, she gave them the confirmation to put their thumbs on the scanning device. Emil thought it was strange how the machines were only operational through a thumbprint scan, but such was the way of technology.

Once they were registered, the lady told them they were free to go wherever they pleased. Before leaving, she also gave them recommendations if they had never been to a place like this before.

"The staff's always willing to help," she said. "And if you want, you can always ask some of the upperclassmen what their workout regimes are like."

"Thanks," Leon said.

"Oh, by the way," the lady said. "Emil, is it?"

"Uh...Yeah?" Emil suspected she only knew his name because of the registration.

"I like your shirt," she smiled.

Emil could feel his face flushing red. "Um, thanks."

When they left, Leon laughed and nudged his friend in his arm. "See? Maybe wearing that shirt isn't so bad after all."

"Shut up, Leon."

"Pfft," he snickered. "Anyway. We should—Aw, shoot. Did you stretch before we left?"

"No."

Leon pointed to Emil's legs. "You need to stretch before you start. If you pull something, it's on you, and it's not pretty when it happens."

"Leon, it's been a while since I've done P.E.," Emil said. He didn't have the courage to tell him he wanted his friend to stay with him.

"That's easy. You just do some lunges and pulls. Arms and legs. Make sure you don't go too far or you might pull something that way, too."

"Leon—" Emil started after him. "You said you'd stay here."

His friend raised a thick eyebrow. "I already stretched, Emil. I'm just going to reserve some machines in case more people show up."

He had a point. This early in the morning, there were already men and women using the machines to prepare their physical strength for the rest of the day. Emil wasn't sure if more people were going to come, but Leon's decisions were rather rational from an objective point of view.

"Oh, I get it," Leon huffed. "You're scared I'm going to leave you all alone like last night."

"N-No," Emil stammered. "It's just been a while since I've..."

His friend smiled. "Well, you made it all the way here, didn't you? Look, all of these people here aren't judging you because it's your first time. Usually when they see someone new, they think, 'Oh, it's a new guy.' End of story. Unless they're assholes. Then I'll take care of them, okay? If you want, I'll just be by the weights."

He paused to look at his friend's physique. "Yeah. Judging by the bones on your arms, I'd say you shouldn't waste your time embarrassing yourself on those. When you're done, just tell me so I can show you how to use medicine balls."

*Medicine balls?* Emil thought, confused. *Like balls filled with medicine?* He wondered why Lukas hadn't told him about those before. Perhaps it was a new thing.

---

Well, after Emil managed to finish stretching, he found out what real medicine balls were. He honestly had no idea why they were called medicine balls. They weren't small, and they weren't carrying any medicine in them. Instead, they were like round basketball-sized dumbbells with straps attached to opposite sides. The idea of the medicine balls was to use them as weights for working out one's core and a few arm muscles. Still, the origin of the name was a mystery to Emil.

"So you take them in your hands like so," Leon explained as he wrapped his hands securely into the Velcro straps. At this point, both of them were lying down on yoga mats alongside some of the girls. Some had giggled at Emil's shirt, but no one made fun of him. "Like, make sure you don't

drop it because right now, I think it'll crush your stomach. You've literally got no abs."

"Ha ha. Thanks for pointing that out, Leon." To further emphasize his lack of ability, he noticed Leon was carrying a seven-kilogram (~15.4 lbs) medicine ball while he gave him only a four-and-a-half-kilogram (~10 lbs) medicine ball.

"Okay, so you go like this," the more experienced of the friends instructed, holding his weight close to his chest. "When you pull your body up, you thrust the ball out above your head like so. Remember to breath out when you come up or you're not doing it right. I'll show you once."

To demonstrate, Leon repeated the action of preforming a sort of sit-up combined with weight-lifting as he brought the medicine ball out in succession. It looked easy enough.

"Now you try," he said when he finished doing it three times. "Remember to breath out when you come up—and try to do it with your diaphragm."

Considering Emil's medicine ball was almost three kilograms lighter than his friend's, he sought out to prove he wasn't as weak as Leon suspected him to be. The first few were easy enough. He wasn't losing any stamina, and he was able to lift the medicine ball well above his head.

"Good, I think you got it," Leon smiled. "Okay, we'll do this for..." He paused to check his phone. "Five minutes. That'll be enough for now. Then we'll shift to upper body."

"What about running?" Emil asked. He suspected since most of the machines aside from the weights were treadmills, cycling machines, and stair-masters, they would be doing some sort of cardiovascular activity.

"Maybe after everything else," his friend smirked. "That's only if you still have energy after we're done."

"I'm fine, Leon."

"Now you are," he laughed, "but just wait until tomorrow."

After their five minutes, Emil's stomach felt like he hadn't eaten anything for the entire day. Eating sounded good right now. He hadn't had breakfast yet—neither did Leon. He wondered if it was better to eat something before working out, but for now, he trusted his friend's judgment and continued obediently with the program.

Next were bars, padded weights in the shape of iron rods. Each one was almost five and a half kilograms (~12 lbs), but in two hands with one's back supporting the weight, they felt surprisingly light.

"It's just like using weights," Leon explained—of course, he was able to carry three bars at once. "So basically all you have to do is lift them—first only halfway until you make a right angle to your chest." Emil noticed some of the girls were watching him explain himself. "We'll do that for fifteen reps, okay? Then, from there, we go from the middle to your shoulders. Don't pull up too quickly, or you'll damage your back—and don't forget to breathe."

"I got it," Emil grunted. "Don't have to remind me."

Unexpectedly, Leon chuckled earning a slight flustered look from Emil and some giggling from the girls. "If you collapse on me, I'll have to face your big brother's wrath."

Emil didn't want that. However, he noticed his pacing wasn't as frequent as Leon's. He was

beginning to miss his lifts, and he was sure he wasn't doing enough lifts to count towards his imaginary quota. Sure, Leon had done this more times than he did, but he was only doing one bar as compared to three. He should have been able to handle himself.

Before he knew it, he was starting to keep his pace—at the expense of his breath. Without having to pause to take a breath, he was able to keep up with whatever music he was listening to.

And then, something happened. His head was feeling light. He thought to take a breath and stop, but he knew he'd sound overly exhausted if he paused. Leon didn't sound like he was out of breath at all. He was even able to talk to him from time to time, but all Emil could respond with was a short nod or a shake of his head. If he stopped now, he'd be panting and wheezing. He knew that.

As time passed on, the refreshingly air-conditioned gym was beginning to feel like one of Tino's saunas. His shirt was beginning to feel like a burden, and he felt like he'd explode with annoyance at any point in time. Even when Leon told him they were almost done, it felt like another half and hour away. His chest was warm and most likely wet—a horrible condition to be in when wearing a cheap white shirt.

"Ice, we're done now," Leon said. "We should drink some water or you're going to get dehydrated. Come on."

But he didn't follow. Instead, he leaned against the nearest wall and slid onto the mats, exhausted.

"Ice?" Leon stopped and bent down. "Hey, are you feeling okay?"

*No, I'm not okay, you dumb shit*, Emil thought. His lungs wanted to explode from keeping his breath inside. His breathing was growing irregular from trying to take in oxygen and expel carbon dioxide as subtly as possible. He wasn't even using his mouth.

"Shit," his friend cursed. "You forgot to breathe, didn't you?" Since Emil made no response, he had to assume the worst. "That's it. We're done. When you can get up, let me know so we can—"

But he never got to finish because somewhere mid-sentence, Emil collapsed to the ground.

Leon blinked. "Ice? Shit. Er, Emil? Hey..." He froze. His friend had lost consciousness.

## Chapter 5

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Idiot."

That was the first thing Emil heard when he regained consciousness. His brother was standing over him with his usual cold blue eyes. Instead of showing concern, he was almost...disappointed.

"This is what happens when you're so stubborn," he sighed, shaking his head. "Leon told me what happened at the gym. They've already checked your condition. You're fine, but it looks like you just lost consciousness due to a lack of oxygen. Your friend said something about forgetting to breathe?"

"Sorry," Emil apologized. "How long have you been...?"

"Half an hour," his brother answered, already knowing what his question was. "Leon called me, so I came here." He clicked his tongue. "Along with—"

"Ice!"

Immediately after that obnoxious burst of worry, Emil felt his chest get crushed by a strong hug. Some annoying blonde tufts of hair got into his face. It could've only been one person.

"Mathias, get off!" he barked and attempted to struggle away. Lukas took care of that. Without any effort, he grabbed ahold of the Dane's collar and threw him effortlessly across the room. It was a wonder as to how he possessed such strength when he looked no stronger than his younger brother.

"Ah ha ha..." Mathias weakly laughed. "We were so worried about you. You should've seen the look on Lukas' face when he found out you collapsed. He was—*Gyyack!*"

"He doesn't need to hear it," Lukas calmly said as his nails dug deeper into the flesh of his friend's neck. "We don't want to make him feel upset any more than he already is, do we?"

"N-No!" Mathias choked.

Then, Lukas released his grip. "Thought so."

Sighing, Emil ran his hand through his fine white hair. "Anyway, where's Leon?"

"Outside," his brother replied. "He figured he'd have the rest of the day to make it up to you so he let us have some time with you alone."

"Oh." *How considerate of him*, Emil thought.

"But it looks like you're fine," Lukas continued. "There's nothing physically wrong with you so you're able to continue your workout with Leon if you want—just remember to breathe."

"I will. Sorry for making you come all the way here."

"Ah, it's nothing," his brother said. "It's a little nostalgic coming back here and seeing my dear little brother in good spirits."

Emil's face fell. "Do I look like I'm in good spirits?"

"You're not in bad ones." As much as he wanted to refute it, Emil didn't feel like he was feeling particularly down. Even if he had embarrassed himself, he didn't feel too conscious about it—not with his brother and Leon around. Mathias on the other hand...

"Emil, if you're even in a pinch, just give us a call!" he said holding out a thumbs up. "Your big brother's going to be a doctor so he'll treat you right, and with me as a prodigious lawyer (in training), there's nothing the school will bury!"

"You're annoying," Emil hissed. "I don't want to go suing anyone, and you already said there's nothing wrong with me." He sighed. "Besides, if you come here, won't you stir up some unwanted attention?"

"Ah, don't worry about that," Mathias dismissed. "The attention's nothing compared to the kind I get at the grad school."

Lukas rolled his eyes. "You're running your pot-mouth. We're leaving."

"Just like that?" Mathias started.

"I've still got to study before classes. You've got some vocabulary to brush up on as well, don't you?"

"That can wait!"

"Emil, I'll call you on Thursday," Lukas said as he was exiting the room. But, right before he stepped out of the doorway, he looked back and said one last thing. "Oh, and one more thing, little brother..."

"Now what?" Emil asked.

Lukas blinked. "Nice shirt."

"Get out!" he shouted as his brother and his friend disappeared from view. When they were gone, Leon returned into the room and sat himself next to him.

"Hey," he said to Emil.

"Hey," he responded back.

Leon pressed his lips together and looked away. As usual, he rubbed the back of his neck and furrowed his eyebrows whenever he was feeling doubtful.

"Look, I...I'm s—I told you to breathe."

At first, Emil was nearly annoyed with the fact that his own friend wasn't coming out to apologize to him, but he soon understood the reason: Lukas must've given him an earful. No wonder he was upset.

"I didn't think I was going to pass out," he replied.

Leon arched his thick eyebrows. "Yeah? And you think it wouldn't have ended in something like getting death glares and subtle *death threats* from your brother?"

Emil scrunched his face. "Lukas gave you death threats?"

His friend rubbed his neck. "Like I said: *subtly*. He didn't say anything like he was going to kill me, but he said if he gets a call about something like this again that...I wouldn't get to be your friend anymore."

"Huh." Emil almost found it amusing if it wasn't for the fact that Leon wasn't genuinely worried. "So instead of our friendship breaking apart, you'd think he'd kill you first?"

Leon looked up. "We're still friends, aren't we?"

Emil had to smile at that question. It wasn't often when Leon was the innocent one in their friendship. "Of course we are."

---

After Emil and Leon had left the nurse's office (which was conveniently located next to the gym), they decided that they had enough of working out for the day, and they chose to head on back to their dorm for a change of clothes—Emil especially.

"Ugh," Emil groaned. "I can't believe you made me wear something like this stupid shirt." He was glad to take off his "GO TO HELL" shirt. Thankfully, since it was still within morning hours, there weren't too many students wandering around campus on this non-school day.

"Oh, wait, wait, wait!" Leon quickly jumped up. "Don't take it off just yet! I wanna, like, take a picture and show Cheng and Mei!"

Emil's expression fell flat. "No."

"Come on...Do it for Cheng and Mei if not for me."

"No."

"Cheng's not going to spread it around," Leon scoffed, "and I'm sure Mei won't..."

"No means no," Emil said. "Whatever you send goes through Yao's stupid monitoring filter. He's going to get it sooner or later. The last thing I need is for a picture to circulate through your Chinese grapevine."

Leon rubbed his chin as though in deep thought. "Well, you still don't have any workout clothes. There'll be plenty of times for me to get a snapshot some other time."

"No, Leon." Emil thought he sounded stupid for scolding his own friend like a parent. "I'm going to go take a shower."

"Hmm. I'd come, too, but I, like, hardly broke a sweat training you. I'll just get dressed. When you're done, we can go to the D.C. to eat."

"Sure." He could use a decent meal after working out for the first time in what felt like years.

The layout of Opal Hall was built in such a way that every five rooms shared a bathroom. Being that it was co-educational, the bathrooms were separated by gender, but the women's restroom was located on the other side of the hall for privacy reasons. Emil couldn't complain since that meant having the bathrooms right across his room and being able to come and go as he pleased.

In Opal Hall, the bathrooms consisted of four sinks, two toilets, and two shower stalls. There were shelves for putting personal items, but since there could be possible theft and sabotaging, Lukas had advised him to keep his shower supplies inside his dorm. A little inconvenience could go a



long way—not to mention the hand soap was not included, so everyone had to bring their own.

*Wonder if anyone's in here...* Emil thought as he came inside the restroom. When he peeked around, no one was at the sink. He then thought to look underneath the stalls. No legs. It was empty.

"Perfect," he mumbled out loud and picked the shower stall closest to his side of the door (since there were two doors leading out to opposite ends of the hall).

This wouldn't be his first time taking a shower in the dorms. During his orientation, he had spent the night at Gold Hall, and for experience, Lukas had suggested getting used to the shower system before officially settling in. It wasn't much different from home other than the recommendation of wearing sandals into the shower stalls—one never knew what could have happened on the floors, after all. There was that and having to take his supplies back into his room with him.

The entire time Emil showered and got dressed, no one from the floor came in to use the restrooms—strange considering there were at least nine other people sharing this restroom. He couldn't complain, though.

After that, he gathered his supplies and returned to his dorm without confronting anyone in the hall. Leon was listening to music and flipping through his phone while he was waiting.

"You done?" he asked, taking off his headphones.

"Yeah," Emil grunted, ruffling his hair with a towel. His silvery white hair was stylized in such a way that no matter what he did to it, it always ended up falling flat into a messy bedhead sort of style. The same could be said about Lukas and Mathias. The most Lukas had to do with his hair was clip it back with his family heirloom hairpin. With Mathias' hair, anything went—so Lukas had mentioned when they had roomed together. According to him, the only time the Dane's hair ever looked tame was when he'd immediately come out of the shower. How his hair was able to defy gravity was a mystery.

Truth be told, Emil wasn't sure what Leon and the rest of his family did with their hair. Every time Leon would shower, Emil wasn't there to see it. He made a mental reminder to watch out for whenever his friend would hit the showers.

Once Emil's hair was dry, the two set off down the stairs. Since they hadn't gotten the chance to do cardio exercises, Leon suggested taking the stairs—again.

"Always the stairs..." Emil grumbled. "Are we ever going to use the elevator?"

"Think of this as your workout, Ice," Leon snickered. He wasn't even breaking a sweat as usual. "But if you want, we can take the elevator on our way ba—Oh! I have an idea! How's about heading over to Gold Hall and hanging out with Yong Soo and Charlie after breakfast?"

Emil wrinkled his nose. "*Charlie?*"

"Charles," Leon corrected himself. "Whatever."

"That guy's a prick," Emil snorted. "Talks funny, too."

"That's 'cause he's from Australia—Hutt River to be exact. It's supposed to be its own country. I'd still call it Australia since it's completely landlocked by it, but he got mad so don't bring that up, yeah?"

"Sure thing. So how about Yong Soo? He talks kind of funny, too."

"Korea," his friend answered. "Found out he was studying overseas at, like, seven different countries in his lifetime."

"Wow. Did you ask what his parents do?"

"Uh...I think one of them's an electrical engineer for a private company\*, he told me. So, like, I guess their family went around the world a lot. The guy's pretty smart, too."

Emil shrugged. "Well, you sort of have to be to get into this school."

"Yeah, but, like, he can speak—what was it—Mandarin, Korean, Japanese, German, some French, and English."

"Oh." Even Emil thought that was impressive. He could barely speak Norwegian after being exposed to English for so long at Academy W. Leon, on the other hand was able to fluently speak Mandarin and Cantonese as well as English, but just to "piss Yao off," he pretended he only knew how to understand Cantonese.

"So how about it, Ice?" Leon asked, getting back on subject. "Wanna hang out with them?"

"I'd rather stay in," he refused.

"Hmm. Hey, what ever happened to that Michelle girl last night? Did you at least get her number?"

"No," Emil frowned. "Why would I? I'd sound like a creep."

"No, you wouldn't. Here, it's like this." Just as Emil was about to roll his eyes, his friend wandered off without warning and approached some girls who happened to be walking by.

Unfortunately for Emil, he was too stunned and too far out of range to hear what Leon was saying to them, but whatever it was, it involved pointing over to him and a few flustered giggles from the ladies.

*Oh, this can't be good...* Emil sighed when Leon returned. He noticed the girls waving as they went their separate ways.

"See?" Leon smirked as he held his phone out to him. "Check it out. I got their phone numbers."

"You barely even talked to them!" Emil burst out. "What'd you say to them?"

"I said my friend—a.k.a. you—"

"*What?!*"

"—was too shy to ask you—as in the blonde one with the short hair—for your number so you think I could just relay yours over to him?"

Emil was about to explode. "Leon...did you...?"

"I gave 'em your number in exchange for hers," Leon grinned. "They didn't seem to mind."

Emil smacked his face with the palm of his hand. "Leon, tell me you're lying..."

"Telling the truth. Now how's about that breakfast, huh?"

---

During breakfast, they spotted Yong Soo and Charles eating together at a booth. It looked like they wouldn't have to look for them after breakfast after all.

"Yo!" Yong Soo beamed, raising a hand. "Leon an' Emil, right?"

"Eh, yeah..." Emil mumbled. He was surprised anyone would remember his name. A few greetings later, he and Leon sat at the same booth: Leon with Yong Soo, and Emil with Charles.

"The food here isn't nearly as well-done as my gourmet cuisine back home," Charles sniffed after clearing his plate. While he had complained throughout the whole ordeal of eating his breakfast, he made a small point about refusing to waste resources, so he managed to finish everything—somehow.

Emil, on the other hand, sat in silence, mainly focusing on his meal. Being that his mouth was usually full of food, he preferred not to talk only delivering a short answer or gesture here and there.

Leon and Yong Soo were the real chatterboxes of the table. Emil wouldn't admit it aloud, but they're personalities were oddly compatible: they both had vast knowledge of the world around them, enjoyed playing pranks on their guardians, and loved movies and music—that being said, their tastes in movies and music were different, but they were liberal enough that they could accept one another's differences.

The place where they did come into strange disagreement throughout their conversation was through spicy foods. Yong Soo loved spicy foods, he said. Leon, on the other hand, was not a fan.

"I thought you put a crazy amount of wasabi on your sushi, Leon," Emil grimaced when his friend brought that up.

"That's different," Leon said. "Ya never know when, like, there's going to be some bad fish. If I'm going to eat it, I might as well not taste something bad."

Emil rolled his eyes. "You and your iron stomach."

"Pfft," his friend snickered. "Speaking of stomach, Emil and I, like, went to the gym to do core this morning right before coming here."

"Oh, yeah?" Yong Soo paused to take a bite of toast. "I haven't gone yet. How was it?"

"Not bad," he replied, "but, I mean, my cousins have already been here so they knew what it was like."

"Must be convenient having relatives who attended the same prestigious school as you," Charles commented.

"Emil's older brother went here, too," Leon pointed out. "He still does. He's in the graduate program for medicine."

Charles looked over to Emil. "Oh, is that right?" he asked. Emil, whose mouth was stuffed with eggs, only nodded.

"Yeah, so going back to the gym, we were doing some core training first before heading on over to cardio," Leon continued. "But, like, so we were about to get some water when Emil, here, starts acting all funny."

"Leon..." Emil fidgeted in place. He had since finished his breakfast. "Do you have to tell them about that?"

"It's a funny story," he smirked. "Well, besides the whole passing out thing."

Yong Soo raised an eyebrow at Leon's friend. "You passed out?"

"Sort of..." he admitted. No point in hiding anything now that Leon was running his mouth.

"Uh-huh. Emil suddenly just leaned against the wall and went out like a light. We had to take him to the nurse's office to see if something was wrong with him. I called up his brother, you know, since he's studying to be a doctor and 'cause he's family..."

"Anyway, so by the time Emil's brother—his name is Lukas, by the way—comes over, they said Emil just lost consciousness because he, like, held his breath too long or something."

Yong Soo burst out laughing. Charles mustered a slightly amused look.

"Emil, you must be a really stubborn guy!" he laughed. "You held your breath long enough to pass out? Oh, man, I thought that was impossible!"

"That's not the best part," Leon smirked. "It was the shirt I loaned him. Oh, gosh, you guys, like, have to see it."

"What shirt?" Charles asked.

"We're not showing them that shirt," Emil growled, his opinion final.

"I'm not going to describe it," Leon told them. "It's a shirt you have to see to believe. How about the next time we workout you guys come with us?"

"I'm cool with that," Yong Soo agreed.

"...I suppose if the shirt really is worth it," Charles reluctantly piped in.

"Oh, it's worth it," Emil's friend mischievously grinned. Emil had all but disappeared under the table now. That's when Leon's eyes suddenly lit up.

"Crap," he gasped. "Ice, we're supposed to go buy the plant."

"*You* are," Emil reminded him, "not me."

"But don't you wanna, like check out the town?"

Being uninformed about the plant, Yong Soo and Charles were looking lost on the subject.

"Pardon me for intruding, but what plant are you referring to?" Charles asked. "Is it perhaps something to do with your class?"

Leon shook his head. "No. My guardian's this *fengshui* fanatic, and one of the things to make our room perfectly balanced is to have a potted plant. It can't be a bonsai, though, because my old man says it's supposed to mean the room is controlling and suppressed."

"Ooh," Yong Soo spoke up. "Did you know *fengshui* originated in Korea?"

Now it was Leon and Emil's turn to look lost.

Leon's amber eyes were trembling. "Um, excuse me, but what?"

"*Fengshui* was adopted by the Chinese in the early C.E. times," the Korean explained. "The Koreans are the ones who believed that having specific colors in their households and decorating them with specific objects would bring good fortune and health."

"Uh..." Leon was nearly speechless. It wasn't often when Emil would see him like this. He almost felt *bad* for his friend. "I hate to burst your bubble, Yong Soo, but you do know that *fengshui* is literally spelled with Chinese characters, right? The characters even spell out wind and water. And the Chinese have been using *fengshui* since the *B.C.E.* times so your claim is false."

"No," Yong Soo stubbornly said. "Koreans came up with it first. The Chinese thought it was cool so they adopted it and changed their records, so it looked like they were the ones who invented it. All they had to do was write records about an earlier date, and that was all. That and they destroyed Korean records."

"That's stupid," Leon huffed.

While Yong Soo and Leon were ensuing in their little argument, Charles leaned over to Emil and whispered, "He was like this with me when I first roomed in with him. He thinks Koreans came up with the idea of using velvet for capes."

"Huh..." Emil didn't know what to say. Good with languages or not, Yong Soo's sense of history and cultures wasn't exactly in the right place.

Somehow, the two had dropped the subject and went back on track with Leon's original statement. "Whatever. So, anyway, I need to by a plant and send a picture of it to my old man by tonight; otherwise, he'll threaten to cancel my phone plan. He's big on that stuff."

"So you'll have to go into town, then," Charles concluded, taking some final sips of his water.

"Yeah," Leon said. "Emil's going. You guys wanna tag along?"

Emil made a face. "When did I say I was going?"

"If you don't go, who knows when you'll go into town?"

"That didn't answer my question," Emil snapped. "I was planning on—"

"Calling up that girl?" Leon smirked.

"What girl?" Yong Soo asked. "Emil, you have a girlfriend? Never took you to be the type—"

"I don't!" he snarled. "Stupid Leon, here, swapped my phone number with some girl on our way here, and now..." He ran his hand through his silver bangs. "...Now she probably thinks I'm some creep!"

"No need to worry about that," Charles reassured him, unfazed. "Back where I lived, I was the talk of the school. Why, I received so much attention that I didn't know how to manage all of the ladies. You know what the simplest thing to do would be?"

"What?" Emil doubted he had anything useful to offer.

"Ignore them. Never call back or reply to their messages, and you'll be done with that. Besides, Eliatha University is a large campus. What are the odds you'll see her again?"

"I don't know..." he mumbled. "But really, Leon. I'm tired. You can go on without me, can't you?"

"Mm, but I thought perhaps you'd, like, be able to buy some proper workout apparel—"

"Fine, I'll go," Emil grunted. This was going to be a long day.

## Chapter End Notes

\*Based on the fact that one of my old roommates' dad is an electrical engineer who frequently travels overseas for work.

## Chapter 6

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The updated bus schedules were posted online for students wanting to commute or explore the area surrounding Eliatha University. Being that the campus was practically constructed on the top of a hill, it was far away from any noise or suspicious activity that one might find late at night on the streets.

Today, the four companions—Leon, Emil, Yong Soo, and Charles—were going to take the bus to the plaza square in Eliatha City. Everyone referred to going down from the campus as "going into town," but it was technically incorrect since Eliatha was more of a city than a small town. Nevertheless, that's what the students and professors referred to it as.

Having relatives who had visited the city more often than Emil's brother, Leon suggested they go to Bull's Eye\*. They wouldn't get there until the fifth stop, so all they could do was wait and listen to their music, each other's voices, or the other conversations happening on the bus.

Since Emil was without his headphones and everyone else was occupying themselves with their own music, he was forced to listen to a conversation of some jocks nearby—at least, he thought they were jocks by the hard muscles showing through their shirts and the way they laughed.

"So the dude's wasted by the time we even get to the party," one of them said. "Man, I tell him about the first rule to going to a party, an' he completely blows it off."

"Don't get drunk before the party," the guys all repeated in unison. Emil wondered if they belonged to one of the nearby fraternities. Then again, if they did, they wouldn't be riding the bus. In Eliatha, they would have been wealthy enough to afford to have cars.

"Hey, so, Alfred, I heard your brother's in college now," he heard someone say.

"Yeah. He's going to some college over in Canada. Studying biology."

"Sweet. So you're going to get a doctor in the family, huh?"

"No, like, he's studying real biology. He's always wanted to study wildlife in the Canadian wilderness."

"Oh. That's cool, too, I guess."

Emil could understand. He suspected most of the students he'd see at his biology lecture would be trying to get into medical school. Lukas went through that, too. He had told him barely a handful of students would be able to get into medical school, and even fewer would have the privilege of attending Eliatha University's rigorous graduate program. It had never crossed Emil's mind that he might have considered going into medical school, so he was usually unfazed by the pre-medical students.

"Mm, gotta go," the one named Alfred said as the bus stopped. "I'm meeting my girlfriend here\*\*."

"Say 'Hi' to her for us, wouldja?" the others called back.

"No prob'!"

Emil then watched as Alfred got off the bus and began walking down the street. With him out of the conversation, his friends began to talk about him.

"What's his girlfriend's name again?"

"I forgot, but they went to the same high school together. Some really fucked up shit happened between them before hooking up."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Totally. Al' even got hit by a car saving her at senior prom."

"Holy shit."

"But, like, his girl's supposed to be super smart. She was the valedictorian back in high school. I think she still is."

"Damn. Going to be one hell of a graduation then. Dude's a lucky guy."

"Yeah."

Just then, Emil felt a tap on his shoulder. "Hey," Leon hissed. "This is our stop."

Emil and the rest of his acquaintances silently followed off the bus and got off after thanking the bus driver. Since it was still early in the afternoon, there weren't too many people walking around.

"Huh," Leon said. "It's quieter than I thought it'd be."

Charles threw in his input. "But of course. It's a weekday barely before lunch starts. What would you expect?"

"Whatever," Leon shrugged. "Um, so, like, when we get to Bull's Eye, you wanna just go over to the clothes section, Emil? I'm just going to go check out some of the plants and make sure it won't die on us." He clicked his tongue. "Knowing Yao, I'm gonna have to take care of it or else he'll give me shit."

"Yeah, that's fine," Emil replied. He turned his attention to Yong Soo and Charles. "So what are you guys going to do?"

"Look around and maybe see if there're any cool stores," Yong Soo answered.

Charles was inspecting the map on his smartphone. "My parents suggested I look around the area to see if there are any stores this shopping center lack," he told everyone. "If there is something that I could possibly invest in, then that would be wise to look into. There are plenty of students around this area. It never hurts to try to milk them for profits."

"Fair enough," Leon smirked. "I'd go with you, but I have to buy the plant."

"Perhaps some other time, then."

"Anyway," Emil looked at his phone, "we have to be back here in an hour for the next bus. Is that enough time for everyone?"

Everyone nodded so Yong Soo and Charles went their separate ways. Leon walked with Emil to Bull's Eye.



"Actually, you know," Leon began when they were nearing the store, "back when Cheng first came here—when I was still in Hong Kong—Yao was thinking about setting up shop here one day."

"Oh yeah?" Emil thought that made sense. When Yao wasn't busy dealing with overseas trade, he had a few multiple businesses his family members set up here and there. "So what kind of store was he thinking of opening?"

"A boba tea place," his friend told him. "It was actually Mei's idea. There isn't one in the area, and if the place was able to serve some hot food and other little snacks, we thought maybe students would like to hang out here. It'd have to be close to the bus stop, though, otherwise the students wouldn't want to walk the extra distance to get here. We were also thinking of giving students a little discount for their purchases to rake in the business."

"Cool. So are you still thinking about it, Leon?"

"Yeah," he laughed. "Yao wanted me to see if it was still possible. I'd have to scout for a good location, though, since the rest of my family's too busy to do it on their own."

"Must be nice being able to set something up so easily," Emil commented. "You think you're going to discuss this with Charles? He seems like that kind of person."

"Nah, Charles talks like the kind of guy who'd want, like, eighty percent of the profits. Yao'd never have that in his business."

Just as Emil was going to comment about the pompous prick, they arrived at the doors of Bull's Eye.

"Okay, so, like, I'm just going to grab a plant, and I'll be done," Leon said. Depending on the situation, he could be an in-and-out kind of shopper. "Want me to wait for you?"

"Uh..." Emil appreciated the offer. Seeing as how his friend was good with fashion, he could have used some tips on what to pick. "I don't mind."

"Then I'll meet you by the fitting rooms," his friend concluded. "See ya in a bit."

"Yeah."

---

Within an hour, everyone had completed their tasks and met back up at the bus stop. While waiting, Leon suddenly tapped Emil's shoulder and pointed him to the other side of the street.

"What?" he frowned. "They're just girls."

"Not just any girls," his friend snickered. When Emil peered closer, he noticed one of them had unusually dark skin. Like the night before, she was wearing a dress, but this time, it was white. Along side her was a girl with short blonde hair and another with glasses and braided sandy blonde hair much like Charles'.

"Michelle! Lili!" Leon shouted over to them.

*Crap!* Emil hissed. He was wondering why the one with the blonde hair looked familiar; she was the one Leon gave his number to.

"Oh! Emil!" Michelle beamed. "Fancy seeing you here!"

"Uh...Hi, Michelle," he awkwardly replied.

"Hmm?" Yong Soo looked up. "Who're these girls?"

Leon made the incomplete introductions. "Michelle, Lili, and..."

"Cécile\*\*\*," the one with glasses clarified.

"Cool. So are you three roommates?"

"Yep!" Michelle cheerfully answered in her fellow roommates' places.

*That's right, Emil thought, Topaz Hall has triples.*

Then, he noticed Lili, the short blonde one, tugging at Cécile's sleeve.

"Something wrong, Lili?" she asked.

"That's him," she whispered, eyeing Emil with a flustered look.

*Oh, crap.*

"Oh!" Michelle looked over to Emil. "So the one who asked you for your number was...Emil?"

"You've got it all wrong!" Emil burst out. "L-Leon! He was the one who—I! I don't even know her!"

"Look at that!" Leon quickly said. "The bus is here! How about we make introductions on the bus, yeah? We can talk on the way back."

Everyone, confused about what exactly was going on, reluctantly agreed and hopped on the bus together. When they found their seats, Leon introduced the guys.

"I'm Leon, and this is my friend and roommate, Emil," he said gesturing over to his silver-haired friend. "These two are Yong Soo and Charles. They live in Gold Hall."

"Charmed," Charles politely nodded.

"Yo," Yong Soo smiled. Emil wished he could be as casual as the others in this situation.

"So, Emil," Cécile began as she folded her hands across her lap, "Lili was mentioning something about how Leon told her you were interested in her?"

"Th-That..." Emil could feel his face flushing a crimson red. "That wasn't me. I didn't mean to freak you out, Lili. Really. Leon's the one who did it. He only asked you because he wanted to prove getting a girl's number isn't such a big deal."

"Well, then..." Cécile turned her attention towards Leon. "...Mr. Leon, I should tell you that getting a lady's number is *not* something that should be done just for laughs. It is a serious matter, and you should know that Lili is an exceptionally sensitive individual. I should know."

"Cissy..." Lili mumbled, a slight blush on her face. Emil suspected that was her nickname for Cécile. He thought it was appropriate given that Cécile acted like an older sister. "I'm fine. Really. As long as my brother doesn't find out about this..."

"It's inexcusable," her roommate said with a stern look on her face. She then turned to Emil,

throwing him an icy cold look that reminded him distantly of Lukas' eyes. "Mr. Emil, if you have no use for Lili's number, then I'm going to have to ask you to delete it from your list of contacts. It will do you no good keeping it in your phone, and if anything, it'll make things worse for you in the long run."

"Eh...Sure, I don't mind," Emil chuckled and took out his phone. He was glad to have a valid reason to take the mysterious number off his list.

That's when Leon stopped him. "Lili, what's your major?" he suddenly asked.

The timid girl blinked. "Z-Zoology," she quietly replied.

"So you're going to be taking biology, right?"

"Um...Yes. With Michelle."

"Then there's no reason for any of you to delete your numbers," Leon said.

Emil hissed into his friend's ear. "Leon, are you crazy? Didn't you hear Cécile? She has a brother! What if he's some psycho like Lukas?"

"But Emil, here, is a marine biology major just like Michelle," Leon said, ignoring his friend's uneasiness. "He's taking biology, too. That means it'll be better for you to keep your numbers in case you ever want to study together."

Unconvinced, Cécile narrowed her eyes. "And what makes you think Lili will want to study with someone like him?"

"Because Emil's shy," Leon flay-out said. "He's not a social kind of guy, and from the looks of it—no offense or anything—Lili is, too. It'd be a win-win situation."

"Lili already has Michelle to study with," Cécile pointed out.

"Yeah, but the more people to study with, the better," Leon told her. He turned to Lili. "Lili, would you like to study with someone like Emil?"

*Oh, gods*, Emil groaned and bowed his head. He didn't need to hear her answer. Just looking at her was enough to make him flustered. Leon was taking things too far again.

"Um...I don't mind," she quietly said.

"You don't?" Emil and Cécile said in unison.

"No," she blushed. "I think it'd be fine."

"Cool!" Leon beamed. "So everything's fine!"

*Everything is not fine!* Emil shouted in his head.

---

"Hmm. Two girls in two days," Lukas said over the phone. "You're quite the popular player, little brother."

"Shut up," Emil grunted. "You're the last person I needed to hear that from."

"*You're* the one who called *me*. Have you decided who's going to bottom?"

"I—*What?*"

"If you're going to be in a relationship with one of them, you should think about who's going to take control," his brother specified. "After all, you let your roommate take the reins. If you were in a relationship, I'd say you'd definitely qualify as a bottom."

"No need to get graphic, Lukas."

"...Some static is in the phone," his brother teased.

"You're giving me too much information, Brother!" Emil shouted. Gods, how he wished his brother wasn't such a tease. "Forget it. Talking to you was a waste of time. I'm hanging up."

Lukas chuckled. "Goodnight, little brother."

Emil groaned. He hated it when his brother would act indifferent towards his discomfort. "G-Goodnight...Big Brother."

---

Outside in Opal Hall's quad, Leon was talking over the phone with Cheng. If there was anyone who played the real father and big brother figure in his family, it was his cousin.

"Like, I saw this place that looked like it was going out of business over around the bus stop," he said. "It's some kind of printing store. You think that's a good place to open something up?"

"We'd have to return and look at it," Cheng said, "but I trust your judgment."

Leon sighed. "Anyway, where's the old man?"

"Yao's off to Hong Kong again," his cousin answered. "He's making sure a shipment of stuffed toys are safely shipped from Macau in the process."

"Huh. Leave it to him to make sure of that kind of stuff," Leon snorted. "Anyway, how's life?"

"The same." From his tone, it sounded as though Cheng could be smiling. He smiled quite often, though. "Regardless of your opinion on Yao, he still thinks about you."

"Yeah, but not in the right ways. And Mei?"

"She misses you, too. She said something about how there's no one around to share tastes in music and fashion with."

Leon laughed. "I can't imagine you in anything but sharp clothes, anyway."

He could hear his cousin chuckling. "So what about you? Are you enjoying college life, Leon?"

"It's alright." Leon yawned. "Classes don't start for a while so, like, it's kind of boring right now."

"That's understandable. But you've already gone to the gym and went to the city. I can't say there's not much else to do until classes open up. Are you being a good friend to Emil?"

"I think so..."

"You think so?"

"We kind of got in a fight after coming back from shopping."

"Oh? Did something happen?"

Leon rubbed the back of his neck. "Ice said I was being too controlling with his life. But I thought it was fine. Because of me, he has two study buddies."

Cheng paused. "Tell me about it."

So, Leon went into details about what had happened at the party last night and the ride on the bus —as well as everything else in between. Knowing how Cheng could read his tone, he spared no details. When he was done, he waited for his cousin to give him his input.

"Leon," Cheng began, "now I'm not saying you were wrong, but I think you should give Emil some space to be himself. The two of you are in college now, and that means being granted some personal freedoms that you would not otherwise have. If Emil doesn't want to study with other people, you should understand that it's his ultimate decision and his alone. Whether or not it affects his academic performance is really his responsibility."

"But..." Leon spoke up.

"Do you remember why you wanted to be Emil's friend to begin with?" Cheng asked.

"...Because I thought he needed one."

"And you don't want him to lose that friend, do you?"

"No," Leon sighed. "I guess I've been a dick."

"I wouldn't put it that way," Cheng laughed, "but try to go easy on Emil. You know he's sensitive."

"Yeah." He smiled. "Hey, um, thanks, Cheng. I think I'll go talk to Ice."

"No need to thank me, Leon," his cousin said. "Remember you can call me any time."

"Mm-hmm. Night, Cheng."

"Goodnight, Leon."

When Leon hung up, he looked up at his dorm's window. Even from the first floor, he could see the potted plant leaning on the shelf facing the northern direction.

"Stupid old man," he sighed with a smile as he made his way back inside. He took the stairs.

---

By the time Leon returned, Emil had gotten ready for bed again. Calling his brother hadn't exactly made things better, and as a result, he was left feeling as restless as he was this afternoon.

"Ice..." he heard Leon whisper. "Ice, you up?"

"I'm up," Emil whispered back, leaning over the rail. "What do you want?"

Leon looked away for a brief second before returning his amber eyes on him. "I'm sorry—for all the shit I've been giving you."

Emil blinked. He thought when the time came that Leon would apologize, he'd be unforgiving and cold. Now that it had happened, he wasn't sure how to react.

"Whatever," he shrugged. "Just don't do it again."

"Huh?" Leon gaped. "Just like that? You're not mad?"

"Too restless to be mad," he muttered.

"Oh." His friend paused. "Hey, so you're, like, not feeling tired?"

"Not really, no."

"Wanna play some *Hetalia Fantasia*? We've got time."

Emil furrowed his eyebrows. It had been a while. Since starting out, he was still stuck around journeyman while Leon had risen to only a few ranks below Yao as the richest player in the game.

"I'll just suck," he said.

"No, I'll help you," his friend offered. "They have this experience-sharing bracelet that lets you get the experience from the monsters I kill. Just stick behind me, and I'll grind some levels for you."

"Leon, my character's kind of weak..." What was he saying? Why was he being so cold? Of course he wanted to play. There was nothing else to do in the university until classes started, and chances were he wouldn't be able to play once school rolled around.

"Ice, you'll be fine," Leon smiled. He was already booting up his laptop. "C'mon, I'll wait for you to log in, okay?"

Finally, Emil sighed and threw over his covers. "Is it alright if I sit on your bed, Leon?"

"Sure," he said and scooted towards the edge of his bed to make room for him.

When Emil had finished getting his charger and hooking up to the campus' connection, he and Leon logged into their usual online role-playing game.

"Pfft," Leon snickered as they met up with each other. "You know Yong Soo plays this game?"

"Oh, yeah?"

"Mm-hmm. His level stats are supposed to be off the charts. Dude has way too much time on his hands. That's what happens when you're a computer science major—always carrying your computer wherever you go."

Emil raised an eyebrow. "Is that true?" At this point, Leon connected his character with the experience-sharing bracelet. It was a set so regardless of who made the kill, their experience points would be shared.

Leon stuck his tongue out. "Beats me. That Korean just has that sort of vibe. Maybe we'll even see him."

"I don't want to," Emil flatly responded. His friend laughed.

"That's fine, too. It's been a while since I've been able to play with you without your brother tailing behind."

"Ah." Back when Emil would invite Leon over to his house, Lukas would insist on playing, too. His character consisted of a type of mage who possessed unusually high status points. Emil always

wondered how his brother found the time to level his character up so high, but he never got the chance to ask.

That being said, since Lukas was at a much higher level than Emil, he had followed behind his little brother wherever they went to make sure monsters wouldn't overpower him. Emil wouldn't have complained, but since they lacked the experience-sharing bracelets, having his brother defeat any monsters ruined his chances of leveling up.

"You don't need to worry about leveling up as long as I'm here," Lukas had once said much to his little brother's annoyance. At least now he was too busy catching up on his medical stu—

"Fuck."

Leon almost flinched. It wasn't often when Emil would blatantly curse. "What's wrong?" Then, he looked over at his friend's chat screen. "Oh, shit. Is that Lukas? What the hell is he doing playing at this hour?"

Sure enough, to Emil's horror, a high-level mage began walking over to Emil and Leon's characters and started up a personal chat.

**CrossCurser:** What are you two boys doing up? I thought you were going to sleep, Ice.

Emil buried his face into his hands. "Lukas, you asshole..."

**KingChan:** liek piss off, bro. were jus playing cuz theres no school.

**CrossCurser:** Your spelling is horrendous, Leon. Ice, log off.

Emil and Leon exchanged looks.

**PuffinMaster0624:\*\*\*\*** And if I don't?

A pause from both parties.

**CrossCurser:** Then I'll kill both you and Leon.

"Crap," Leon said aloud. "Your brother's stats are pretty high. I mean, I can kill him, but..."

"...Somehow I don't think that's a good idea," Emil finished also wearing a befuddled look.

"Guess we're logging off," Leon sighed. Without typing anything else into the chat, he logged out with Emil following after. "Goddammit. I was kinda hoping we wouldn't have to worry about him."

Once the two of them had logged off, they both sat side by side wearing blank expressions on their faces. Then, Leon heard a snicker followed by a full-blown laugh. Emil was laughing. Soon after, Leon followed.

"Wh-What the actual fuck just happened?" He was gasping for breath. "Holy shit, I was really scared."

"Me, too," Emil chuckled. "For a second, I thought we were really going to fight him."

"Oh, gosh." Leon wiped his eyes. "If we killed him, he would be so mad the next time we see him. Can you imagine how long it must've taken him to level up that high?"

"Too long," Emil smirked. "But that was good."

"Totally."

After catching their breaths, with nothing else better to do, Leon and Emil shut off their laptops and returned to their beds.

"Hey, Leon?" Emil piped up.

"Mm, yeah?"

"Today wasn't too bad."

"Yeah?" A smile was nearly cracking on Leon's face.

"Lots of crazy stuff happened."

"Yep."

"It was pretty wild for the first full day in college. I had fun."

Leon smiled. "Me, too."

"...Good night, Leon."

"G'night, Ice."

## Chapter End Notes

\*Parody of "Target."

\*\*Based on an old story of mine, but that's where the whole concept of "Eliatha" and "Eliatha University" stemmed from. There are a few differences like Denmark going to business school and Prussia going to engineering (though Prussia in this universe is a computer sciences professor). They take up different majors in this series.

\*\*\*Unofficial human name for Monaco.

\*\*\*\*06/24 is the day between Iceland and Hong Kong's birthdays. It also happens to be Thailand's birthday.



## Chapter 7

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Feliks was making his morning rounds through the doors when Leon was dreaming. Having just woken up, he fondly remembered his feet being pulled under molasses as he jump-kicked a man in a black jumpsuit away from an Emil in distress.

...At least, he thought it was Emil. He had long hair and a nice rack.

"Wakey, wakey, sleepy heads!" he heard a sassy voice shout from the other side of the door. "You guys've got crash classes! Up, up, up!"

"Crash classes?" Leon heard Emil mumble from above. He was awake, too. "What was that, again?"

"Uh..." He tried to think of something the residential assistant brought up, but he couldn't quite recall. Running out of ideas, he flipped through his phone and saw that some time late at night, Feliks had sent out a text message with a reminder:

**Crash classes tomorrow at 7! It's mandatory!**

Leon groaned and flopped back on his pillow. "I don't know what it is, but it's mandatory," he yawned. "Looks like we've, like, gotta get ready for that. Damn Feliks...I'm gonna give him hell."

"Don't," his friend said. He was already crawling down from his bunk. "Let's just get ready so we're not late."

"Whatever, Ice," Leon slurred and rolled off his mattress.

---

"Totally sorry, but I forgot to tell you guys you had crash classes today," Feliks quickly apologized as he led his little group of freshmeat towards the auditorium. He didn't sound sorry at all.

"What're crash classes?" someone from the crowd asked.

"They're like, little versions of your classes," the residential assistant explained. "Basically, you get to see the professors, and they'll, like, talk a little bit about the overview of your courses. It also lets you guys get an idea of where your classes are."

"If that's the case, then shouldn't you have told us to get our bikes?" someone else groaned.

"Nah, you're going to need the exercise," Feliks replied. "Don't wanna gain those freshmen fifteen, do ya? So, anyway, as I was saying, we're going to be meeting in the auditorium for a quick little rally, and then we'll pull you off into classes, m'kay?"

"Wait a sec," a student said. "There's nearly three thousand of us. There's no way the auditorium's going to fit that many freshmen."

"Oh, don't worry about that, kiddo. We're doing this by halls. First round is Opal, Topaz, and half of Gold. Later at ten, it's going to be Ruby, Sapphire, and the other half of Gold."

A chorus of groans sounded out from the freshmeat.

"You mean you forgot to tell us, *and* we had to go to the early session?"

"Life's not always fair. Get used to it."

Leon and Emil were trailing somewhere behind the back at this point. With everything that had happened yesterday, neither of them were in the condition to make any smart remarks without mustering a yawn.

"Mm, so, like, that means you might be seeing Michelle and Lili," Leon told his friend.

"Mm-hmm." Emil stopped to yawn. "Guess so."

"Wonder how long the crash classes are."

"Beats me. Lukas never said anything about this."

Leon tossed his head back to get the uncombed bangs out of his eyes. "Neither did Cheng or Mei. Wonder if this is new."

"I dunno."

Regardless, all the students eventually made their way to the auditorium where Gold and Topaz Halls had already arrived. Like a slap on the face to Feliks, even Toris' side of the floor was already there.

"Feliks, you're a little late," his counterpart residential assistant commented.

"That's because the little freshmeat had some trouble getting up," he explained.

"Bullshit!" someone shouted. "He forgot! He woke us all up just to come out to this thing!"

"Uh..." Toris ultimately decided to drop it to save the embarrassment of both the students and Feliks. "Never mind. Everyone, please fill up all the empty spaces. There are still people coming in."

When Leon and Emil took their seat, the lights began to dim, and the doors closed behind them. Then, in the center stage, two tall and grand-looking figures began walking towards the center. One of them had curly brown hair that looked unkempt, but because of his muscular build, it made him appear youthful. The other had straight blonde hair that was tidily braided into a ponytail; one might have thought he was a new-age hippie if it wasn't because he was overly muscular, too.

Leon let out a low whistle. "Know who those dudes are, right?" he asked Emil.

"Uh, I think I saw them at Lukas' graduation," he replied. "The deans?"

"Bingo." Leon gave him a victory peace sign. "Weird how this university has two deans running the shows together. Different personalities, too."

Emil remembered now. "Yeah."

"So which do you like better?"

"Uh...I guess Augustus\* is cool, but Folkert\*\* is more serious about what the school really needs."

Leon laughed. "I think I like Augustus just because he's pretty laid-back."

"Oh."

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the very first crash classes meeting in Eliatha University history!" Augusts announced in a cheery voice.

"So that's why our family's never told us about this," Leon snorted. "It's the first. Wake me when it's over, okay?"

"Leon!" Emil hissed, but he had already dozed off. He could understand why. Every night after Leon would go to bed, he would stay up to check his social networking status and message his relatives overseas. So, for better or for worse, Emil let him sleep while he listened to the lecture.

When it was over, Leon felt a nudge from his side and heard a clattering stampede of students getting up to walk.

"Hnn?" he muttered. "It's over?"

"Yep," Emil said. "You're in the 'sosh' majors, so you have to walk over to the east. I'm going west. I'll see you at lunch."

"Huh?" Leon blinked. "You going to be alright?"

"I'm not a child, Leon. I can take care of myself."

"Sure you can. Fine. I'll text you when I'm done."

"Whatever," Emil mumbled and disappeared with the rest of the natural science majors.

---

Emil's first crash class was biology. As expected by the size of the class and the details his brother had given him, the entire lecture hall was overflowing with freshmeat piling up over the chairs. He was about to take a seat in the back when he heard someone calling out his name.

"Emil!"

When he looked over in the direction of the voice, he saw Michelle waving to him. Like the other times he had seen her, she was wearing a dress; this time, it was a deep maroon. Lili was sitting quietly beside her wearing a sunny yellow dress that complimented her golden hair.

"Oh. Hey, you two," he said as he hastily sat beside Michelle.

"I thought I'd see you here," the Seychellois beamed. "So where'd Leon go?"

"He's a business management major so he's at the sosh buildings."

Interestingly, Michelle tilted her head. "Sosh?" she repeated.

"O-Oh. It's short for social science," Emil explained. "Um...Th-That reminds me. Lili, where are you from? I never found out."

"Um..." The timid zoology major clutched her dress. Emil was pretty amazed at this; he never thought he would meet someone shyer than him in Eliatha University. "I'm from Liechtenstein."

Emil blinked. "Really? So...I'm assuming you're rich, then."

The girl blushed. "I wouldn't really say too rich. It's only because of my brother's side of the

family."

"Oh, yeah. You mentioned something about your brother yesterday." Emil paused. "So does he go here?"

Lili nodded. "Mm-hmm. He's an accounting major. A sophomore."

"That's nice." He managed a smile hoping she wouldn't be too shy around him. He had been in her position several times when hanging around Leon. "My brother went here, too, but he's in the medical program at the grad school now."

"Oh."

*No point in sticking around that subject, Emil*, he told himself. "Uh, so, why'd you want to go into zoology?"

His question got a smile out of Lili. "I want to be a veterinarian," she told him. "I've always loved animals."

"Cool." Emil looked back at Michelle. "What about you? You have any reason for being a marine bio major?"

Michelle smiled in a far-off way. "It's because with the changes in the climate, the fish back at home are changing their behaviors. We're not getting as many fish visiting the islands like we used to, and because of that, not as many tourists are visiting." She cradled her chin on her hands. "I want people from all over the world to see what a beautiful place my home-country is, and I hope that when they visit, they'll be able to see all of the fish, too."

Then, she laughed. "It sounds like a silly dream, but that's really why I studied hard to get in this school."

"That's...understandable," Emil said. He would have thought that for someone coming all the way from Africa, it was a big step in being able to fulfill her dream. Perhaps he should have given Michelle more credit than she had.

"Alright, everyone!" someone from the front called across the lecture hall. "Are you kids in the right room? You want to be in biology, right?"

There was a hum of nods and "Yes" buzzing throughout the students so the person (whom Emil assumed was the professor) cleared his throat and commenced the beginning of the crash class.

"So tell me this: how many of you want to go into med school? Tell me—Raise your hands. Come on, everyone. Raise your hands and let me see 'em."

Emil, Michelle, and Lili watched as nearly eighty percent of the entire hall raised their hands on command.

"M'kay," the professor nodded. "And you know that it's a big deal even being able to get into this school, but only about ten percent of you are going to be able to get into a real medical school." He paused to let that process through the students' heads. "And tell me this, how many of you want to go to E.U.'s med program?"

Like last time, nearly eighty percent of the students raised their hands.

The professor nodded again. "Mm. Well, I have to tell you this: only about one percent of you are

going to be good enough to get in. One. So welcome to the first course of biology, kids. Now, I know some of you are only taking this course to fulfill some engineering or psychology requirement, but you've gotta understand that it's not just all fun and games.

"For most of you, this'll be the first test to see if you have what it takes to really study your asses off and pull with an A. 'Cause if you don't get that A, why are you even here?"

Some of the students looked at one another when the professor finished. Emil was trying to picture what his brother must've looked like when this professor told him the same thing.

*Then again, he doesn't show too many expressions*, he flatly thought. All the same, he knew he had to study hard, as well, if he was going to pass the class. While he wasn't here to become a doctor, he was here because he wanted to study the aquaculture and behavioral patterns in the fish back at his country of birth. It wasn't going to be all fun and games. Michelle and Lili had their reasons for being here, and Emil wasn't about to say his reason was any less significant.

"On that note," the professor continued, "I'm just going to go over the syllabus, and just a brief overview on what you need to buy for this class by Thursday. Those of you who already registered—and I'm sure that's ninety-nine percent of you—should know that the syllabus is online, but rules are rules, so I've gotta go through it."

And so the rest of the lecture was spent listening to the professor go over the syllabus. After finishing, Lili went off to her mathematics class while Emil and Michelle went off to the visual arts building.

"It sounds scary trying to become a doctor," Michelle commented while they were walking to their next course. Since Lukas had instructed Emil on how to get to his classes before moving in, Emil led the way. "I knew more people wanted to become doctors than real biologists, but he didn't have to say it like that."

Emil shrugged. "That's just how the real world works. My brother—wait, did I tell you he's studying to become a doctor?"

Michelle searched through her thoughts for a moment. "I don't remember," she finally said. "But I remember you saying he's in the medical program here."

"Well, my older brother—his name's Lukas—is over there, yes. He was one of those one percent the professor was talking about."

"Oh! So he's smart!"

"Mm-hmm. He knew about how tough it was so he studied his...behind off. He told me about how hard it was, but I can't really relate. I didn't want to take the medical route."

"It would have been interesting if you had, though," Michelle giggled. "Your parents would have been happy."

Emil furrowed his eyebrows. "They said they were happy with whatever I chose. I think getting into Eliatha University was enough to brag about. I don't know about you, Michelle, but..."

"Oh, my grandpa was really happy when I got the acceptance letter," she beamed. "He said I would be going to the best school for research. I told him he was going to be proud of me when I came home to see him. It's going to be a while..."

"Aren't you going back for the summer?"

Michelle shook her head. "We can't afford to send me back every year so I'm going to stay here until my student visa is used up."

"Oh." He couldn't relate since he and Lukas lived within driving distance. "You think you're going to be homesick?"

She shook her head. "I'll be fine. This is a wonderful country\*\*\*."

Emil smiled. "I'm glad you like it." Then, he turned his attention away from her for a moment to see the visual arts building coming into view. "We're here."

Michelle smiled. "I wonder what sort of teacher we're going to have."

"Hopefully not someone like that prick of a bio professor," Emil grumbled.

"Yeah," she laughed. It sounded nice being able to make her laugh.

---

Leon was stuck in economics. The lecture hall was fairly large, but despite the concentration, he managed to find Charles and Cécile sitting together interestingly enough.

"Well, well," he smirked as he invited himself over. "Didn't think you two were a thing."

Charles scowled. "We are not," he refuted. "I just so happened to remember her name and face from a distance and decided to sit with her."

"Right." Leon smirked even wider. "So, like, what's your major, Cissy?"

In response, Cécile narrowed her eyes and adjusted her glasses. "That nickname is only reserved for friends, Mr. Leon."

"Ouch. So, like, I'm not your friend?"

"You are not deserving of being one of mine," she coldly responded.

"Whatever." Leon was fine with it either way. It wasn't hard to faze him when it came to socializing since he had seen his fair share of experiences back in Hong Kong. "You gonna tell me your major?"

"Business management," she said.

"Sweet. So am I."

"What a small world." Judging from her tone, Leon thought she could have been sarcastic.

"But, you know, you don't look like you'd be going in that field," Leon pointed out.

"How *very* observant." So she was being sarcastic. "I plan on using the experience to go into casino management."

Leon raised an eyebrow. "Seriously? Where are you from, again?"

"Monaco."

That explained it. "Monte Carlo?" he guessed.

Cécile adjusted her glasses once more. Leon was used to seeing that gesture since Cheng would

often do that, too. "Your concept of geography is not as poor as I thought, Leon."

"Heh," he dryly laughed. "I get that a lot."

Then, the Monacan threw him a sly smile. "I'm sure you get the ladies with that, too," she sneered.

*Double ouch.* If it wasn't because Leon had been used to worse, he might have winced. Some of the Hong Kongers could tell it like they meant it.

"Alright, you little shits, settle down."

Upon hearing that profanity, the entire hall quieted down. Leon suspected he'd hear at least one of his professors use curse words. So this would be at least one of them. This professor's hair distinctly reminded him of Mathias, but his hair was slightly neater in the upright sense and his eyes were a deep green. Oddly enough, he had a scar on his forehead that complimented the scowl on his face. In short, this professor didn't look like the kind to fuck around with.

*Guess I'm not going to joke around in his office hours,* Leon thought.

"So I know most of you kids just want to take this class to get something out of the way. Really, what you get out of your money is what you pay for, but it's up to you if you want to learn the material." The professor paused to say something off his microphone. "If you're going to stay in this class, I'm Professor—Screw it. Forget that. Just call me Tim\*\*\*\*. Most of you stupid shits aren't going to pronounce the Dutch part correctly, anyway."

"Ooookay." Leon rubbed the back of his neck. So he was Dutch.

"I'm just going to go over the syllabus, and I'll let you all out early," Tim said, plopping a pen in his mouth and flipping through some slides on the projector. "I'll bet none of your R.A.s told you what you needed so you don't have to take notes."

He looked up and did a quick head count of the students. "This is a big class, anyway, but you're welcome to do whatever the hell you want in the classroom: play games, nap, check your phones...

"But if I hear any music or snoring or any of that other crap, I'll fail you. I'm nice enough that I let you do pretty much whatever so be respectful. And don't smoke, either. Do that outside in designated areas. You don't want to be that guy who sets off the sprinklers and pisses off your peers. Now, with that being done..."

And then Leon fell asleep.

"The syllabus is online, anyway," he muttered to Charles and Cécile before leaning back and dozing off. Emil had told him he didn't snore, so he wouldn't have to worry about being disruptive.

---

The culinary professor was what Emil's mother might have called a "ladies' man." He took the time to know a few personal things about each of the female students and even kissed each one on the back of their hands, something that would have gotten him in trouble with administration had he not been so smooth about it.

Normally Emil would have rolled his eyes, but despite being a professor, this guy played the part: suave, smooth-talker, seductive accent, clean and husky build...

"...And what might your name be, my pretty little snowflower?" the professor asked Emil.

By the gods, if Leon had been there, he would be laughing his ass off.

"Emil Steilsson," he replied using as deep and disinterested a voice as possible. "I'm a guy."

Instead of looking flustered or shocked, to Emil's disturbed surprise, the professor only smiled.

"But of course I knew that," he chuckled. "I was just hoping to know the name of such an esteemed and exotic little lilac blossoming in my wonderful studio of the edible arts."

*Is this guy for real?* Emil wondered.

"So your name is Emil," the professor said, placing his hand on his shoulder. "It's nice to have someone with such silvery hair and such an innocent look in my class. You must be quite the ladies' man."

*I could say the same about you,* Emil wanted to say. "Um...not really, professor. I'm sort of... awkward."

"Then, you are a lucky boy to be in my class. When you come out, you'll be ready to take on the beautiful world with a confident cooking style to call your own."

"I hope so," he responded with a doubtful smile. He wasn't sure if the professor was just that good or just that arrogant. If Mathias was a little smoother with women and talked in a funny French accent, he thought their arrogance might be on the same level.

Whatever the case, his professor would not be able to prove his skills on the first day. The only thing they did was run over the syllabus and go over a few safety instructions and equipment they were expected to bring to each class. Thankfully the class was only once a week. Emil didn't think he wanted to be seen carrying his own apron around campus for more than one day.

"...And if you are ever looking for tips to perfect your true sense of art," the professor (who insisted everyone call him Francis) finished, "just come to my office, and I'll be more than delighted to show you a thing or two about *true* taste palettes."

Emil didn't know why, but several of the girls giggled at his offer. *Oh, brother. I just hope chem' doesn't end up being like this.*

---

Fortunately for him, Emil's chemistry professor was not a seductive bastard.

"I've had people fail this class so don't be discouraged on your first try," he said. "It's hard, but it's not that hard. Just keep up on your toes, and practice, practice, practice, and you'll be good to go. Don't be afraid to come to my office hours. Since it's a hard subject, I also host review sessions. I'm not going to have them the first week because honestly, I don't think anyone gives a damn until midterms roll around. I'll post a schedule online when I get the T.A.'s all together. Any questions?"

No one raised their hand.

"Good," the professor said. "So I figured since we still have...Let's see...Ten minutes, I'll just start a little with the lecture. We'll continue on Thursday, but I figured we might as well get a head start. Chem's a busy, busy class, and we've got a lot to cover."

The rest of the crash class was spent reviewing individual components of the periodic table. After everything was done, Emil's brain was practically fried. He made the excuse that he was only acting as such because he hadn't had anything in his stomach.



"I think Professor Adnan\*\*\*\*\* was nice," Lili said after leaving with him. They had planned on meeting back up with their roommates in front of Opal Hall for a late lunch.

"I guess he's alright," Emil muttered. "I think my brother had him. He's a little kooky, but he knows what he's doing—as long as you go to his office hours."

Lili flinched. "I forgot to write them down! Emil, do you have his office hours?"

"Eh, yeah, hang on..."

Since they were without notebooks Emil had to resort to recording everything on his phone. Just as he was about to show Lili, his phone began to vibrate.

"Goddammit!" he cursed and saw that the contact number read "Big Brother."

"Big Brother?" Lili read aloud.

"Yeah," Emil distastefully replied. "Um, excuse me for a sec. I have to take his calls." *Otherwise he'll come all the way down here, knowing him.*

"H-Hello?" he reluctantly spoke into the phone.

"Ah. So you're out of class."

Emil made a face. "How'd you know about that? The deans said this was the first time the school had crash classes."

"I have my ways," his brother teasingly said.

"Lukas..." Emil looked over at Lili. He still had to give her the chemistry professor's office hours. "I have to do something for someone. Can you call me back?"

"What was that I heard? Sounded like some mumbling on the other end."

"*Grrgh!*" he growled. "Please don't make me do this in front of her!"

"In front of who? Is that still static I hear?"

*Gods, Lukas!* "B-Brother, I need you to call me back."

"Ah, why didn't you say so?" Lukas teased.

"Idiot..." Emil grumbled over the phone. He could've sworn he heard his brother chuckling.

"Is tonight fine, then?"

Emil gritted his teeth. "Tonight is *perfect*. Bye." He was glad to hang up. All the while, Lili was still waiting.

"Ah, so, um... Was that your brother?" she asked.

"Yeah," he shamefully said. "Hard to believe someone so annoying was at the top of his class, right?"

Lili only giggled. "I think it's nice having a brother with a sense of humor."

Emil had to roll his eyes. "You don't know my brother's sense of humor, Lili. Trust me."

Eventually, Emil and Lili met up with Leon who happened to run into Yong Soo on the way.

"Yo, so you guys like your teachers?" the Korean asked.

"They're very...interesting," was all Emil could say. "I've got a cynical bio professor, a kinky culinary instructor, and a loud chemistry one."

"Sweet," Leon smirked. "Can't beat mine. My econ teacher lets us do whatever as long as we're not making noise or smoking some kind of joint."

Emil's expression fell flat. "Oh." So this was the esteemed Eliatha University at its finest.

"Charles and Cécile are in that class, too," Leon added.

"Speaking of those two, where are they?" Yong Soo asked. "I kinda thought we'd see the others here by now."

Emil shrugged. Unlike Lili, he didn't have the others' numbers so all he could do was wait. The sooner they met up with them, the sooner they would get to eat.

Soon enough, the others came around, and so, they all decided to eat together, sharing their first college class experiences. No one's instructor could quite top the culinary professor, though.

"Gee," Leon commented when Emil and Michelle had finished taking turns describing their class. "You sure he's not, like, bi or something?"

"Uh, well, we're not minors anymore so I guess he can't really be considered a pedophile..." Emil brought up.

"I thought he was nice," Michelle piped up.

"Er, whatever you say." He wasn't about to let his guard down in the kitchen.

"Don't worry, Ice," Leon said, slinging his arm around his friend's shoulder. "If he gives you trouble, just tell me, okay?"

"Whatever, Leon," Emil frowned. He didn't think he'd be getting any trouble any time soon, anyway.

---

The rest of the afternoon had been spent eating and talking about their classes. It was only when everyone decided to return to their dorms that Emil thought to run over his syllabi.

"Should've checked them sooner," he mumbled as he scanned over his chemistry syllabus. "It says here that I need lab coats this year. Lukas didn't say I needed those things."

Leon looked up from his phone. "Must be because the school wants money," he assumed. "So what're you going to do?"

"Well, I checked online, and it says the coats are always cheaper to buy somewhere off-campus."

"Have you at least looked at what the prices are at the student store?"

"No, but I was planning to."

"Cool, we can go together," Leon said jumping off his bed. "I need to purchase some test booklets

for my classes."

"Oh, yeah, I have to buy scantrons, too," Emil groaned. "Lukas said I shouldn't believe what the upperclassmen say. The scantrons are only supposed to be a few coins each."

"Yeah, Mei and Cheng told me about that," Leon said. "They still have some scantrons from when they were in college. I still need the books, though. C'mon, are you ready?"

"Hang on. I just want to make sure I don't need anything else." As he looked through his culinary class's syllabus, he scowled at the thought of having to purchase his own apron and recipe book written specifically for the class. According to the syllabus, the apron and recipe book were available at the student store. On top of that, he needed a lab manual for his chemistry class. It looked like he would have to do some extra shopping.

"M'kay. I think I'm done," he said as he closed his laptop. "It's not cheap being a bio major."

Leon laughed. "Sure you wanna still study those whales?"

"Shut up."

"Okay, okay, I got it."

"I'm ready."

"Right, let's go." Leon took a moment to make sure he had his wallet and student identification on him. Emil did the same.

On their way out, Leon noticed there was a sign on their door as they locked it.

"What the hell...?" He looked closer.

Emil made a face. "Free condoms and lube at my room. Feliks," he read. "How come I didn't hear him writing it on our door?"

"Beats me. Hey, so, like, wanna get some when we come back?"

"What?" The thought of ever needing condoms or lubricants in school was absurd.

"You know, just to see how they work," Leon innocently said.

"I don't understand you some times..."

"Heh. I'm used to that by now." He paused. "Oh, by the way. Ice?"

"What?"

"I had a dream about you last night."

## Chapter End Notes

\*Unofficial name for Roman Empire.

\*\*Unofficial name for Germania.

\*\*\*Eliatha University along with Academy W are set in a fictitious country.

\*\*\*\*Unofficial name for Netherlands.

\*\*\*\*\*Turkey's surname. He's the chemistry professor.

## Chapter 8

"Forty heta for a lab coat?!"

"Take it or leave it." The person manning the register looked as though he could care less whichever way.

Leon (who had already decided that three heta for three test booklets was too expensive) could empathize with his distraught friend's reaction.

"Ice, you know what? Let's blow this joint," he suggested. "We're going somewhere else."

Emil was about to protest and prepare his wallet when Leon grabbed him by his shoulder and dragged him outside.

"Wh-What's your problem?" he snapped. Before he could say anymore, Leon shot a finger out at him.

"We're going to be doing things the Cantonese way," his Cantonese friend said without any loss of composure in his cool demeanor.

Emil had to narrow his eyes at his wording. "And what would the Cantonese way of doing things be?" he dared to ask.

"We're gonna haggle."

"Leon—"

"Just kidding. We're going to do some comparative shopping."

Exasperated, Emil furrowed his eyebrows. "But that means we have to go back into town, and I bet it's only going to save a few heta."

"Money makes the world go 'round, little snowflake," Leon told him.

"I wish you would just stay with one nickname..." Emil grumbled. He was accustomed to being called "snowflake" by his best friend, but sometimes, he wished he would stay consistent with what he addressed him by. "Ice" was fine. "Snowflake" sounded a little feminine.

"Leon, need I remind you that time is also money?"

"You got anything else better to do?"

"Well..." Emil thought about it. "Besides playing *Hetalia Fantasia* and running into Lukas again, no, I guess not—"

"Fantastic. We're going back to town."

So, it was back on the bus and into town for the two of them. Leon would have invited Lili and Michelle considering they needed to buy supplies, too, but for reasons unspecified, they were too preoccupied for the day.

"Guess it's just you and me, Ice," Leon said as he clicked his phone screen off.

"I'm fine with that," he replied, looking out of the window.

For the most part, the bus ride was quiet except for Leon making a comment about the merchandise. To save some time, he took the opportunity to look up the prices of aprons, lab coats, and possible recipe books in the area. After a while, however, his expression turned a little sour.

"*Tch*," he clicked his tongue. "You know what, Ice?"

"What?" Emil didn't even bother looking up.

"I think that, like, no matter what, you have to buy your recipe book from E.U. I can't find it anywhere in retail."

Sighing, Emil rolled his eyes. "Makes sense, I guess. The instructor wrote that book."

"Seriously?" Leon arched his eyebrows. "So, like, he's one of *those* professors?"

"Guess so. Like I said: he's kind of like a promiscuous Mathias." His comment made Leon chuckle.

Speaking of the loud-mouthed Dane, someone with an equally loud (if not louder) mouth came making his way into the bus as though it was his birthright.

"Ja, that's right," he practically screamed into his phone. "Hold up. I'm on the bus." At this point, neither Leon nor Emil could understand what he was saying since he began speaking in some foreign language.

Just then, Emil flinched as Leon's arm shot out in front of him brandishing a phone.

"What the heck!" he hissed.

"*Shhh!*" Leon snapped. "Look at that guy! He's got white hair just like you!"

So he did. That made three people in the world Emil knew with white hair. Judging from the color of his roots, he could tell his hair was his natural color. The person sporting the hair wasn't particularly old-looking, and on top of that, he had the brightest red eyes he had ever seen. He was a true albino.

"Gonna take a few pics..." Emil then heard his mischievous friend say as he took a few snapshots.

"Are you crazy, Leon? That guy doesn't look like someone to be messing with!"

"Just a few more, Ice," Leon only smirked and finished up with a few more snapshots.

Just then, the albino clicked his phone off, stopped talking, and began to walk towards the back—where Leon and Emil happened to be sitting.

*Crap, crap, crap!* Emil gasped.

When he stopped, the loud albino leaned on one of the holding posts and leaned towards the speechless boys.

"Like what you see?" he asked with a cocky smirk.

Emil, unable to register what he had just heard, had to leave Leon to do the talking.

"Er, uh, yeah. Totally." Thankfully, Leon was better at controlling his expressions than Emil. He

managed to hold an appreciative smile. "My friend, here, has white hair, and we really don't see others with it."

"Of course not!" the man grinned. "If everyone did, then I wouldn't be as awesome!"

*Uh...* Emil was starting to get the feeling that this man was similar to Mathias in more ways than just his loud voice. He had the same ego problems, and just like his brother's Danish friend, he wasn't afraid to flaunt it.

"I can get that," Leon replied. "So what's your name?"

The man seemed to look at them with what appeared to be a disgusted look. Or perhaps it was shock? Horror? Emil couldn't tell which one it was.

"You guys freshmen?" the man finally asked.

"Yeah," Leon nonchalantly replied.

"I'll let you guys off the hook this time, but from now on, you'll both remember me as Gilbert Beilschmidt." Then, he turned around and shouted into the bus. "Did you guys hear that?! If you guys don't know my name, then I'll fail you!"

All the while as he was giving his episode, Leon and Emil wore shocked looks on their faces. No one who had met Gilbert Beilschmidt forgot about him. That being said, their family never told them what he looked like—only that they would remember him when they came across his path.

When the rest of the passengers aboard the bus seemed to get the memo, Gilbert returned his attention to the freshmen.

"So what're your guys' majors?" he asked.

"Marine biology," Emil instantly replied.

"Business management," Leon coughed shortly after.

Gilbert clicked his tongue. "*Scheisse*. And here I was hoping you'd get the privilege of being taught by my awesomeness."

"Yeah, what a shame," Leon sarcastically remarked. Emil would have been afraid for his friend, but thankfully, due to Gilbert's overly inflated ego, the sarcasm passed through him like rubber darts bouncing off a tank.

"If you're ever thinking about transferring to engineering, let me know!" the albino shouted. Then, as if on cue, the bus stopped, opened its doors, and allowed Gilbert to step off with a flamboyant stride. A few seconds later, the bus closed its doors back up again and continued to drive on.

When Leon and Emil were sure they were out of hearing range from their recent conversationalist, they breathed sighs of relief.

"Oh, shit," Leon wheezed.

"I thought he was going to kill us..." Emil shuddered.

"Nah, that's illegal."

Gilbert Beilschmidt. It was a notorious name more than it was a revered one. Despite the eccentric

and arrogant professor having made achievements in engineering and computer sciences, his character was something that could have used an enormous deal of improvement. His classes—much like Emil's culinary instructor—required textbooks written by him. Students had complained about how the textbooks lacked the necessary information needed to pass the course, and the text were said to have been riddled with exaggerations on how "awesome Dr. Gilbert Beilschmidt" was. In short, students unfortunate to be left with no alternative were not happy when attending his classes.

On the other hand, Gilbert also had a younger brother, an engineering professor as well. While Gilbert earned his postgraduate academic degree in computer sciences, Ludwig Beilschmidt, his brother, earned his in mechanics. Ludwig's classes were said to be generally practical and easy to understand. Reviews said his curriculum was strict, but in the long run, at the very least his students left his classes knowing how to use the material into further studies.

"Thank gosh I'm not in engineering," Leon groaned. "You know back when Cheng was finishing up his stats major, he actually had a class with him?"

"No way," Emil gaped. "He did?"

"Yeah. It was on game theory. You know what that is, right?"

"Something about economics," Emil muttered. To fulfill his upper division social science requirements, Lukas had taken game theory, too. The details about the class were fuzzy, however.

"Well, I guess, like, the previous professor had a falling out with the school or something so Beilschmidt taught it that year," Leon explained, making a face. "But, like, I think after the reviews, it was the last term he taught it, too. Cheng said it was bad."

Emil made a face. "If Cheng thought it was bad, then it had to be bad."

"Totally. You know what I think?"

"What?"

"That dude needs to get laid."

"Th—But—! Leon, not so loud!"

"It's the truth," he innocently defended himself. "Oh, but you know what? Mei. You know how she loves to gossip, right?"

"Uh...I try not to think about it," Emil reluctantly said. Leon's cousin was a nice person. He didn't want to think poorly of her.

"Well, she was friends with Bella—you know. Carriedo's girl."

"Huh?" Emil was completely lost.

"Oh, you're hopeless." Leon rolled his eyes. "Basically, Bella, this grad' student who's friends with Mei, told her Dr. Gilbert—man, that sounds funny—used to have a girlfriend."

Emil smirked. "Look who's the gossiping one now."

"You wanna hear this or not?"

"I'm listening."



"So, anyway, the girl was kind of in a shaky relationship. I don't think anyone who went out with that guy would have lasted long. But you know something interesting?"

"What?"

"After Gil's girlfriend broke up with him, she went back to some other guy." Leon took a moment to let Emil take the entire information in. "And you know who the guy's she's dating still is?"

"Who?"

"Ol' Roddy back at the academy."

"Huh? Mr. Edelstein?" Emil blinked. "Seems kind of weird. They're really different."

"Tell me about it."

"He and Gilbert are nothing alike."

"That's what I told Mei, but apparently it's the truth."

"Weird."

After a while, the conversation was dropped, and Leon and Emil were left wondering what they had initially been concerned about to begin with.

"Something about comparative shopping?" Emil suggested.

"Well, yeah, I got that part down," Leon frowned. It was as though he had forgotten something important—something that was fleetingly or spontaneously important that should have been brought up right as Dr. Beilschmidt had finished talking to them.

Then, it struck him. "Oh, fuck," he cursed.

Emil looked up. "Leon?"

"Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck..." Leon flopped back down on his seat. "The bus stop we were supposed to get off at was the same one Gil got off of."

Emil froze. "...So...in other words, we have to..."

"Yep. We have to go all the way around again."

## Chapter 9

Lukas was not forgiving when his dear little brother told him about the details of his unfortunate afternoon.

"If you had called me first, you wouldn't have gone through this kind of trouble," he said after Emil finished complaining about the extra two hours they ended up taking. At least he was able to save fifteen heta on the lab coat and ten more on a retail-bought apron.

"I can't rely on you forever, Lu—Brother," Emil grunted. "I'm eighteen now. I can take care of myself."

Lukas nearly chuckled. "You're clinging a great deal to Leon for someone who says he's an adult."

"Th-That's because we're friends!" he snapped. "And don't give me that crap about how you do fine without Mathias—because I know you rely on him, too!"

He had a point there, but Lukas, being the slightly stubborn older brother that he was, refused to admit it.

"Anyway, you bought all of your supplies, correct?"

"Yes."

"And Beilschmidt didn't give you any trouble?"

"No. But he said he would fail everyone on the bus if we didn't remember who he was."

"...I don't think you're going to forget about him."

"Definitely not," Emil grumbled. "Um...so what about you? Are you settled in?"

"For the most part," his brother replied. "But Mathias still comes in uninvited every now and again."

Emil chuckled. "So he's still doing that." While his brother had the privilege of getting a single room, he was still interrupted by Mathias whose uncle happened to be the dean in the Department of Health and Social Sciences. Because of his connections, Lukas' childhood friend had free access to Lukas' dorm—so as long as he was present in the room which, unfortunately for him, happened to be quite often.

"Housing hasn't considered letting me buy my own locks," Lukas sighed. "It's considered violating school property."

"...It's just a few more years," Emil said trying to find a cushion for his brother's uneasiness. "After that, you and Mathias won't have to see each other as often."

"I wonder about that..." his brother replied in an otherworldly voice.

"Yo, Ice!" Leon had just gotten back from a short errand. It had taken less time than Emil thought.

"Ah, I hear your friend," Lukas then said. "I think I'll leave you alone until Thursday then."

"But—"

"You said you're an adult now, right? You don't need to call me every day. I'm not your mother. Thinking about that, you should give our parents a call, too. I'm sure they're worried about you."

"Y-Yeah," Emil sighed. "Okay. I'll call you later, then."

"Bye, little brother."

Emil wrinkled his nose. Leon was right behind him as though waiting for him to call Lukas his dear "Big Brother."

Sighing, he gave in and finished off his call. "Bye, Big Brother." With that, he hung up and looked back at his friend. "So where'd you go? You got back pretty fast."

Much to his immediate regret, he saw that his friend was wearing a particularly large grin on his face. "Check it out," he said as he dug into his pocket and pulled out multiple multi-colored square packages. Emil wasn't too well-versed in the brands, but he could distinctively make out the label, "F.M. Bunny."

"No..." He shook his head in disbelief. "Leon, you didn't..."

"I sure did," he smiled and tossed him a small golden package. When Emil caught it, he looked at the labeling and reluctantly squeezed the contents beneath the shiny wrapping. As expected, he felt a rubbery, circular ring moving around in between his thumbs. The feeling of the package was enough to tell him what it was. Reading it only furthered the validation.

"Ribbed for extra sensation," he mumbled, reading the features aloud. "Cherry-flavored—Leon, seriously?"

"What? You wanted strawberry-flavored?"

"No! I wanted neither!" He threw the package back at his friend and climbed to the top of his bed where his laptop was sitting. "I can't believe you actually took them from Feliks!"

Leon passively shrugged. "They were free so I thought, like, why not?"

"Why not?" Emil echoed. "Why do it at all?"

"Hey, why are you being so sensitive about this?" Leon chuckled. "Did you think I swiped all the good ones?"

"No! I mean, what if—You took so many! What if Feliks thinks that we're—" Just thinking about it made the fragile-minded boy flush red and bury his face in his pillow.

"Aww, you're afraid he'll think we're a thing?" his friend teased. He could read him like a book. "Relax. The only thing we have to say is 'No.' He'll get it. But, like, I thought it'd be awkward buying them at a store before turning eighteen. I don't know why, but getting them from Feliks seems okay. He's not bad for an R.A."

"Leon..." Emil groaned.

"You know, I've never tried them before," Leon continued, ignoring his friend's discomfort. "I think Yao would have flipped if he saw me trying them out at home. You know how he is. He'd be asking me if the girl was smart, or Asian, or what kind of Asian..."

"Leon, I can't believe you..."

"You ever try them before?"

"No, I have *not* tried a condom on," Emil snapped. "Stop talking about them."

"Man." Leon scratched his head. "You're really sensitive about this stuff."

Since he quieted down, Emil thought that perhaps his friend had gotten the memo, but instead of letting it go, he heard someone climbing up the rails to his bed.

"It's nice up here," he heard Leon say. "I really wish I could've gotten the top bunk."

"Get off!" Emil screamed. "Get down! You're annoying! Take your stupid condoms away and practice them on someone else!"

Leon blinked. "Huh. Is that really what this is all about? Ice, I don't see you in that way. You don't have to worry."

"Leon..." Emil was growling through his teeth. He was wondering just when his friend would leave him alone.

"Fine." Leon pulled back his hands and jumped down from his bed. "Someone's on her period."

"So annoying..." Frustrated, Emil pulled his covers over his head and dug his face into his pillow. He was exhausted after everything that had happened. All he wanted to do was take a nap.

"Leon," he mumbled through his sheets.

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to take a nap. Don't bother me."

"Gotcha."

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Emil didn't get much sleep because within a few minutes after dozing off, a loud blaring noise shot into his eardrums.

"Holy Elia—!" he gasped as he hit his head against the ceiling with a *thunk*. "Ow..."

"Aw, crap, are you serious?" Leon groaned from below. Cursing, he shut his laptop closed and grabbed his wallet, the noise blaring continuously into both of their ears.

"Le—" But Emil's voice was drowned out from the noise. Having just been woken up, his heart was racing, and his ears were ready to pop from the intensity of the alarm. Outside, he could hear students already exiting their dorms and groaning about the sudden inconvenience. Then, Feliks began pounding on all of the doors.

"Fire drill!" he shouted. "Meet me downstairs in front of the quad!"

"Fuck," Leon cursed. "Ice, grab your card and phone."

"Don't need to tell me what to do," Emil grumbled and threw on his shoes. This happened in every dorm at the beginning of the year, he had been told. Even the graduate students had to go through something like this in the case of an emergency. So today would be his first one.

In the case of a real fire hazard, elevators were prohibited. As a result, the stairwells were

completely clogged with students trying to get out of the hall and away from the noise.

"Pah," Leon dryly laughed. "This is like a fire hazard, itself. All these people shouldn't be clustered around the same place like this."

"They can't help it," Emil said. "It's annoying being in here."

When they did manage to squeeze out of the stairwell, Feliks was at the quad as previously announced. At first Emil thought he should have been performing a head count of his residents when he remembered not everyone was presently in the dorms at this time. Some of them might have even strayed away to pass the time.

"Ugh," Leon groaned. "Ice, you wanna stop by Hatches? I haven't been that way yet. Maybe we can get some ice cream."

"Er..." Emil paused to look back at Opal Hall being overrun by students coming out and complaining. "Sure, why not? There's nothing else better to do here."

So, the two friends ditched the fire drill and headed up in the direction of the classroom buildings.

"I think it closes at the same time dinner at the D.C. does," Leon said as he checked his phone. "You've got your E-card, right?"

"Yeah," he replied. While also counting as their access into Opal Hall and into their bedrooms, their Eliatha University identification cards (popularly known as E-cards by the campus) also acted as their meal plan counter and point card for purchases.

At the beginning of each year, a balance of roughly a hundred and fifty heta was added into the students' cards to be used towards services such as laundry, on-campus stores, and the dining facilities. Like the Bonnefoy Dining Center, the students' E-cards could be used towards places like Hatches.

"Mathias told me they have really good Danishes," Emil said as they followed the signs guiding them along the right path. "Of course, he said they weren't as good as the ones he makes, but if he says they're good, they have to be good."

"Hmm. Guess I'll grab one for breakfast when I come up here on Thursday."

"Yeah. They're probably not fresh right now—if they have anything."

Lukas, Mei, and Cheng had told them about the morning rushes. Crowds after crowds of students would rush into Hatches before their morning classes and snag the pastries.

While all of the pastries were generally praised for being delicious, the most famous of them all were their dragon puffs. Why they were called dragon puffs, no one remembered, but the delectable consisted of fluffy baked dough with a fine coat of powder sugar on top of crispy, golden crust. Inside was either hot fudge, cream, or sometimes a type of jam made courtesy of the culinary arts school. Since each one of these addictive goodies could be downed in a single bite and bought by the dozen, they were considered a rare delicacy, and because of their popularity and relatively low cost, they were usually gone before noon.

"Emil, we totally have to get dragon puffs one day," Leon said.

"Uh-huh," Emil fully agreed. If his brother didn't deny enjoying them. "We'd have to wake up early, though."

"I'm fine with that." When push came to shove, Leon was able to get up shockingly early without being fazed.

When they arrived at Hatches, as expected, there were no more dragon puffs. A large sign in front of the menu's chalkboard told them enough.

"That's cute," Leon chuckled. "They even drew a picture of a dragon." While he was taking a picture, Emil stopped to admire the colorful chalk drawing of the dragon. It was a squat, jolly-looking dragon with an apron and a chef's hat; it was also carrying a tray of what appeared to be dragon puffs. In short, it was a contrast to the real design of Eliatha University's mascot: a sinister, devious-looking black dragon wielding a sword and a scroll.

As they went inside, the rich aroma of coffee, the spicy scent of baked goodies, and the hearty smell of freshly baked breads greeted them by the front counter.

"It's been a while since I've been here," Leon smiled. "I think I came here when Mei graduated, but they were all out of everything. Wonder what we can find now."

"Let's look around and find out," Emil suggested.

In the back, there were trays of exotic breads that they had never seen before—all complete with foreign names. At the cost of his curiosity, Leon took the time to look up the names of each one while Emil browsed through some of the pastries. He was about to walk up to the glass domes when he tripped on someone squatting down in a hidden corner.

"Ggh! Sorry!" he gasped as he regained his balanced.

"Eh?" The person he had accidentally kicked looked up. He looked as though he hadn't been paying attention. Emil thought that if he hadn't taken the time to apologize, his minor injury might have gone completely unnoticed.

"I, um...I tripped over you," Emil guilty told him. "I didn't mean to. I just didn't see you there."

"Oh, no, that's fine," the man laughed. He had a hearty laugh much like Leon, but his aura was warmer and friendlier—and a little more oblivious like Mathias'. "I guess I should be more careful."

"Really, I'm sorry," Emil apologized again.

"No need!" the employee grinned. "I've gotten my fair share of profanity before!"

Emil made a face. "That's not...I don't think I used profanity." *And why would that be something to smile about?*

"Ice, come over here!" Leon suddenly called.

*Oh, thank gods,* Emil breathed in relief and quickly excused himself from the man before meeting up with his friend. When he arrived at his side, he saw that Leon was staring intently at some ice cream behind the glass.

"Did you know they serve crêpes here?" he excitedly asked.

Emil had to smile. If anything besides a new album or a new game could make his friend this excited, it was food.

"I don't think Lukas ever told me about crêpes being served here," he said.

"That's because it's a new item," the lady behind the counter told them. "They just made it a new item about a year ago." Suddenly, she stopped and leaned closer to Emil.

"Hold on," she blinked. "You said you know Lukas?"

"Er..." Emil exchanged looks with Leon. "Yeah? He's my brother."

"I knew it!" she beamed. "You two look so similar! But you're so much cuter than him!"

"N-Not really..." Emil thought that he and Lukas looked nothing alike: he had white hair with pale lavender eyes while his older brother had light blonde hair with dull sapphire eyes.

Then, Leon leaned into his ear. "That's Bella," he whispered. "She was one of Mei's roommates."

"Huh?"

"So cute..." she continued to smile. "Oh, but would you like to try the crêpes?"

"Eh—"

"We sure would," Leon answered for the both of them. "I'll have one with cheesecake, green tea ice cream, and fudge."

Emil blinked. "Isn't that a little excessive?"

"I'm not eating dinner after this," he justified. "Might as well enjoy it."

"Uh..." Emil had never eaten at the dining commons without Leon. If his friend wasn't going to be eating there tonight, he figured he wouldn't be, either. "Th-Then I'll have one like my friend's—but perhaps with chocolate ice cream, please."

"Sure!" While she set to work making them, Emil returned his attention back on the breads.

"If we're not going to be eating at the D.C., should we get something to go?" he suggested.

"Sure, why not?"

Some of the breads, Emil realized, weren't even European. Some had been made in an Asian style; these were the breads Leon recognized and put on his tray.

"I've always loved these," he said as he loaded up on breads filled with something called "taro" and others with cheese and hams.

"What's taro?" Emil asked.

"Don't worry about it, Ice," Leon replied. "I've got doubles of everything so we can just share. You're a little indecisive when it comes to food."

"Excuse me," he flatly responded.

"Boys, they're ready!" Bella called back to them. Leon was already preparing his E-card so Emil followed, but as he made his way around the corner, his foot ran into someone's leg.

"Crap! I'm sorry!" he hastily apologized. When he saw it was the same person, he wondered if it

was the employee's fault or his.

"Oh, don't worry about it," the man said. "That happens from time to time."

*Getting kicked in the leg?* Emil wondered.

"Toni, try to be more careful," Bella told the employee.

"Ah. Sorry, Bella," the man apologized and ran his hand through his messy brown hair.

"He gets like that from time to time," Bella giggled as she handed Leon and Emil their receipts.

"Just ignore him. That's what he does with his surroundings most of the time, anyway."

"What?" her co-worker piped up.

"Nothing, Toni," she giggled. Then, she leaned towards the boys and began to whisper.

"I gave you two a little something special with your breads," she smiled. "I hope you enjoy."

"Th-Thank you," Emil mustered a smile.

"Thanks," Leon added in. "Oh, and Bella? Mei says hi."

The lady looked confused. "How do you know I know Mei?"

"You were her roommate, right? I'm her cousin."

Leon's words seemed to reach her because her green eyes suddenly lit up. "Oh, that's right! You're Leon, correct?"

"Yep."

Bella smiled. "She's always said you were the fashionable one in the family. I see she wasn't lying."

"Heh," Leon chuckled. "Thanks."

"Leon..." Emil grumbled. "Come on. The ice cream's going to melt."

"Ah, sorry," he then said. "I've gotta go. Thanks, again."

"No problem!" Bella giggled. "I hope you two enjoy!"

Once they were outside, Leon suggested looking for a place to sit down and eat.

"Feel's kind of awkward eating when there's a time limit on your food," he said. Eventually they found a spot by the pond where Topaz Hall could be seen on the other side.

"It's good," Emil commented as he chewed through the ice cream cone. Perhaps it was because classes hadn't started yet or because Bella had relations with both Leon and Emil's relatives at some point, but whatever it was, she had gone out of her way to make succulent crêpes for the two of them. Both of their crepes were stuffed to the brim with ice cream and drizzled with fudge on the insides. There was a little slice of cheesecake tucked into the ice cream, and to top it all off, there was a little waffle cone (also filled with ice cream) situated on the tops of each one.

"She really went all out," Leon said as he finished his waffle cone and proceeded with the main



crêpe.

"Yeah. She was nice," Emil agreed. "I wonder how she knows Lukas."

"Beats me," his friend shrugged. "But Mei said she's supposed to be a grad student now. And that guy you kept tripping on—"

"Shut up."

"Heh. But seriously, the guy working there is named Antonio, I think. He's a grad student now, too. I think there's something going on between him and Bella, but Bella never told Mei about it."

"Oh."

"Pfft. And you know something else?"

"What?"

"Bella has an older brother. Tim. He just so happens to be my econ professor."

"Huh."

"Mm-hmm." Leon took a bit out of his cheesecake. "Oh, yeah. What was that special thing Bella gave us?"

"I didn't check," Emil said. Then, he thought to open the plastic bag where, wedged in between the breads, there was a little white box.

"This it?" Leon asked as he pulled it out. "Wonder if it's a cake or something. It can't be bread."

"Let's find out." On that note, Emil began to carefully undo the box letting out a fresh, sweet smell drifting up into their noses.

"No way," Leon gasped. "No fucking way."

Emil swallowed. Suddenly, his eyes were torn between his crêpe and the box's contents.

"Dragon puffs," he breathed.

## Chapter 10

The days just went by like a dream. One day it was Monday, the next, it had flown all the way to Thursday morning.

Leon was already up checking his online statuses on his many social networking sites. Emil, on the other hand, had not been able to fall asleep the night before, and had slept well past breakfast.

"You're finally up, huh, Ice?" his friend chuckled from below. Emil saw that he had grabbed what appeared to be a hot cup of a drink. Knowing Leon, it had to be some fancy tea brimming with hot milk.

"What time is it?" Emil muttered. He had left his phone down on his desk, and his blankets were feeling too comfortable to climb down and retrieve it. It was then that he made a mental reminder to buy a clock for their wall.

"It's ten fifty-eight," Leon said looking at his computer. "It's almost lunchtime. I was going to wake you up so we could do some stretching and cardio, but I thought I'd let you sleep in." He took a sip of his drink. "It's the first day of classes, after all."

"Oh, yeah." Then, he thought it was best to roll out of bed and get dressed for the day. "So do you have any classes?"

"I'm having philosophy at noon," his friend replied. "The teacher was alright, but he looked like he was going to pass out on us. I hope he doesn't do that again."

"Eh, I just hope no one sets something on fire," Emil responded. Before changing, he took a moment to check his computer for any school announcements. He received an e-mail just last night from Professor Bonnefoy telling everyone to have their aprons by the first class day. "Nothing," he said as he closed his laptop. "I'm going to get changed." With that, he went to his closet space. In Eliatha University, the freshmen dorms all had open closets: one side was reserved for Leon and one side was reserved for Emil. As he was changing, he thought to ask his roommate about his morning.

"So what'd you do while I was sleeping?" he asked.

"I went to the gym with Yong Soo," Leon told him.

"How was that?"

"The guy's pretty fit—for a computer science major. I knew he wasn't out of shape, but he's actually kinda muscular."

"Hmm." Emil changed the subject. "Where'd the tea come from?"

Leon softly chuckled before answering. "Of course you'd know it was tea. I got it from Hatches. When we were there last time, I took a moment to check out the menu. It's not bad. Not as good as the one Cheng makes, but it's not bad."

"Oh. I might get some tomorrow, then." Since Emil's culinary class would be around late afternoon, he would have no reason to stop by for a pick-me-up.

After a few minutes of dressing, Emil took a moment to look into the mirror. Courtesy of Leon's

family, they had a full-length body mirror behind their door so they wouldn't have to constantly go to the bathroom. When Emil was finished examining his outfit, Leon sat up and grabbed his take-out cup.

"You hungry, Ice?" he asked.

"Er, yeah," he sheepishly answered.

"Wanna come with me to the D.C.? I figured I'd get some food before class starts."

"Sure," Emil agreed and grabbed his E-card.

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Outside, there were already students heading to their first classes. Since the upperclassmen had all settled in, there was a significant spike in the amount of students walking through the sidewalks. Some were on bicycles, others were on scooters, and then there were those like Leon and Emil who would be walking for the rest of the year.

"It's actually nice having a bike around," Leon told him as they were nearing the dining commons. "Mei had one. It's easy to get around, but you have to watch out for thieves. Someone she knew had his tires stolen."

"In my case, though, Yao just didn't want to get a bike for me." He shrugged. "I'm cool with walking."

Emil sighed. "Lukas said walking to my classes and up the stairs would be the only exercise I'd be getting. He's not too far off from that."

This made Leon laugh. "Ice, we haven't even been in college for a week, and you're already saying stuff like that? Don't worry about it. You're going to be fine. I'll make sure you're breathing right next time, okay?"

"And that I'll have better clothes to wear," Emil added. He was still uncomfortable about wearing the fire-spitting unicorn shirt.

When Leon and Emil arrived at the dining commons, they saw that the entire place was already starting to fill up with students, staff members, and visitors from other campuses filling up their plates.

"Damn," Leon whistled. "I've never been here on a school day. So this is what it's really like."

Regardless, they stood in line like everyone else, checked into the dining commons, and began to select their desired dishes. Along the way, Emil thought he saw a few familiar faces including Feliks and Toris. While they may have been residential assistants, they were students just like every one else on campus. It made Emil wonder just what sort of classes they were taking this term.

"Ice, I found us a table," Leon called as he gestured towards a booth. As they took their seats, Emil shyly looked around and observed the types of students sitting at each table.

Some of the tables were rather diverse with equal-minded students and different races. Some of them were full of jocks making loud noises and telling stupid jokes to one another. They must have had some sort of hive mind because Emil thought their jokes weren't funny in the slightest. There were also groups completely overrun by girls doing more talking than they were eating, but when Emil saw their plates, he could understand where they found the time to converse. Some of the

tables had occupants spread out with individuals; Emil took these people to either be grabbing something quick to eat before heading to class or simply people with no friends.

*If Leon wasn't here that might've been me*, Emil thought. Then, he felt a light tap on his backside.

"Earth to Emil~" Leon called. "You there?"

"Huh?" Emil blinked. He had been so preoccupied with the other tables that he had not noticed his own tablemate calling for his attention.

"Geez, Ice. You spaced out for a second."

"Th-That was...I was just looking at the other tables."

Leon smirked as he dug into his chicken alfredo. "Yeah, they've got some weirdos hanging out in E.U. if you know where to look."

Emil paused to take a bite of his butter roll. "So is philosophy the only class you have today?"

"Nah, I've got econ later at six," his friend said. "I'm kind of curious as to how he's going to teach. He seemed kind of cool at the time."

Emil narrowed his eyes. "You're not going to be one of those students who just comes to class and plays games on his laptop, are you?"

"No," Leon smirked, giving him an untrustworthy appearance. "Why would I waste my old man's cash goofing off?"

"Leon, you got a scholarship..." Emil reminded him. It wasn't exactly a fair scholarship. Since Leon had come from Hong Kong barely two years ago, he was considered an international student. Added with his grades and his leadership in the Asian club, he was pretty much set for the rest of his college days—that and the rest of his family were fairly wealthy as it stood.

"But, like, if I wanted conventional stuff, I'd have to pay that out of my own pocket," Leon pointed out. "That stuff's not exactly geared towards my education enough."

"Hmm." Emil took a sip of his coffee. It was a little late in the day to be drinking it, but something told him he would need it soon.

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"Alright, everyone! Did you all remember to bring your aprons?" Francis, the culinary professor, asked his class.

There was a murmur of "Yes," and so the class commenced. Since Francis had already gone over the safety precautions, he handed out a sheet of paper to each student.

"This will be the only time we'll be doing any written work in this class," he explained as the students shuffled around in their book bags for a writing utensil. "We'll be taking a quiz on the safety components of this facility. If you get more than three wrong, I'm afraid you won't be allowed to participate in today's activity. Next week, you'll be able to test again. The same rules will follow.

*Crap*, Emil cursed. He hadn't expected the professor to test them on this right away. When he looked wearily over at Michelle, he saw that she wasn't looking particularly prepared for this quiz, either.

"No cheating, everyone," Francis said as soon as everyone had settled down. "You have ten minutes to complete your quiz, and it starts...now!"

Papers shuffled, seats creaked, and pencils and pens set to work as Francis walked around the room. Emil's left hand was covering his answers just in case any of the students here were feeling desperate—not that looking at his answers would be of any help.

*In the case of a third-degree burn from scalding water, you should...*

Emil dug his hand into his hair. He didn't remember. All he could think about was what sort of dishes they would be running over in the class, not the safety precautions involved. If they weren't allowed to conduct anything while Francis was away in the first place, what was the point of knowing the safety procedures? Shouldn't they have expected their instructor to be in their room the entire time? This wasn't fair.

"Five minutes," Francis announced.

*Shit!* Emil winced. *Five minutes already passed?!*

No matter. He had to book it or risk wasting an entire three and a half hours on reviewing Monday's notes again.

*Use logic*, he told himself. *In the act of flambé-ing a crêpe—why would this guy even expect amateurs to be able to cook with combusting wine in the first place?*

"Three minutes," Francis counted down.

Emil bowed his head and set to work scribbling answers down as fast as he could. There were twenty answers and nearly seventy percent of his quiz was blank. He would have looked up, but he didn't want to look too suspicious on the first real day of instruction.

Finally, the ten minutes was up, and Francis told everyone to switch papers with the person diagonal from them. Then, the instructor went through all of the answers in fair amount of detail. As he called out each one, Emil would wince at a few of the responses; he couldn't recall if he put anything remotely similar to the correct answers.

And, when his paper was returned, he nearly breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that he had missed the maximum amount of three answers.

"Raise your hands if you have *not* earned a seventeen or higher," Francis called out. To Emil's surprise, nearly half of the class raised their hands. Apparently they had been unprepared for something such as this quiz. Then, the instructor cleared his throat. "I would normally force you to study over the week to come, but since this is an art class and not a math or science class, I am expecting you to learn as you go. Regardless of your scores, you are welcome to partake in today's studio. Now, get your aprons and textbooks and open them to page seventeen..."

"Oh, shit," someone breathed. "I thought he was going to kick us out."

"Dumbass," another person responded. "We're *paying* for this class. He doesn't have a right to kick us out."

"Oh, yeah."

Then, Michelle leaned over to Emil. "I thought I was going to fail..." she sighed in relief.

Emil forced a reassuring smile. "Relax. You heard that guy. We're paying for this class so he has no right to remove us from instruction."

"Yes, but I was really scared," she whispered. She seemed to be trembling in place, the poor thing. Emil would have comforted her, but he was shaky with words as it stood.

Nevertheless, pass or not, everyone put on their aprons, tucked their hair back, and opened their recipe books to the seventeenth page.

*Crêpes*, Emil thought with an amused smile as he looked at the details. There were no pictures inside the recipe book, he recalled when he had purchased it. Perhaps it was to take away the students' expectations of what a successful dish looked like. At least there was no cheating in cooking.

"Now our first lesson will be on crêpes," Francis announced. "The ingredients are simple, but the dish, itself has an infinite amount of uses. Getting the technique for getting the perfect thinness as well as the confections will be your main challenge for this instruction. Until I have evaluated your mastery level for this first dish, you are not allowed to garnish your crêpes in any way, understand?"

No one protested so he continued. "Moving on: I will first to a live demonstration—no crowding around the tables, please! Make sure those in the back are able to see."

Despite his request to let everyone see, the students couldn't help but watch their instructor work on their first assigned dish. An egg, some thin milk, a thin well of flour in a ceramic bowl, and a whisk. Emil was unsure if the crêpes they would be making were savory or dessert crêpes. They could go either way.

Then, everyone watched in silent awe as Francis mixed the egg and milk together until it turned a consistent creamy yellow color. Then, grabbing the bowl of wet ingredients, he began to carefully pour the contents into the flour well and started to mix it until it was even.

"The key is to avoid making any lumps by mixing thoroughly," Francis explained. "Normally, the cheap way would be to put everything into a blender, but the messes that follow as well as any cleaning are too disastrous and time-consuming. Oh, and before I forget: the person sitting next to you will be your partner. If you have not introduced one another, do so now, please."

While Francis was still mixing the milk, egg, and flour, the students took a moment to introduce themselves. Michelle giggled when Emil turned to her.

"Nice to meet you, Emil," she smiled.

Emil chuckled. "Nice to meet you, too, Michelle," he replied.

After introductions, Francis readied his grill and explained the process to his students.

"You have to do some test runs first," he explained. "The first ones are always discarded. Your firsts will be there to show whether or not your grills are hot enough and efficient. Regardless, we discard these. Please toss them in the labeled waste bin, please. Our university has a special waste depository for food and compost items."

Then, using a ladle, he took a careful spoonful of his crêpe mixture and began to pour it into the middle of the pan. Using a specialized spatula, he began to spread the batter evenly around the circular pan until it was completely covered.

The students held their breaths as Francis then took the spatula and began to carefully trim the edges until the entire crêpe was free. Next, he used a quick lifting motion and flipped it effortlessly over and let it sit.

"The second side does not need as long," he explained as he tapped the golden brown side down. "Wait a few seconds and soon, you will have a wonderful crêpe. The fillings will be up to you, but like I said: the first one is always scrapped. Secondly, until you get my permission, you are not allowed to use fillings. Fresh ingredients are paid for, and if you waste them, we'll have to charge you extra."

Some of the students groaned.

"But," Francis piped up, "as your reward, after I've evaluated your performance and presentation, you are free to eat your crêpes if you wish—or you can scrap it, too. Whichever you like. The ingredients you are permitted to use have already come out of your wallets."

"It looks so easy..." Michelle sighed. "What kind of crêpe are you going to make, Emil?"

"Um, well, I guess an ice cream crêpe is out of the question..." he murmured. He just stood by and watched as Francis folded the scratch crêpe into a neat triangle and set it aside.

"Golden finish, no loose batter, thin texture, and voilà! A perfect crêpe! If you read the book, you'll find that you may also put a dash of vanilla for sweet crêpes. It's really your preference. Cooking is an art, and your food is your expression. Be inspired, be creative!"

On that final note, he led the students to the storage where their own supplies were already prepared. All the while, Emil and Michelle were discussing what sorts of crêpes they might make when they perfected their techniques.

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A few hours earlier, Leon was stuck in philosophy. In consistence with his earlier observation of his professor, he noticed Professor Karpusi wasn't doing any better than when he had last seen him.

"As you can see, the world's concepts can be based on cats," he said, pointing his laser pointer to a picture of a common house cat. All the while, Leon was doing his best to prevent himself from whipping out his laptop and checking some of his statuses. If this was the first real class, what sorts of things was he going to except down the road?

"...Cats are awesome," the professor yawned. "They...they are...Ah..."

"Sir?" someone from the front spoke up. "You alright?"

"Didn't get much sleep," came the reply from the droopy-eyed professor.

Leon didn't mean this to sound romantic, but he thought if the damn professor would straight his posture out and drink some coffee, he wouldn't look half-bad. After doing some research, he had found out his professor was Greek. With Greece supposedly holding one of the top results for sexual activity, Leon was wondering if this particular professor was anything like the generic Greek stereotype.

*Even if he was, he sure doesn't look like he has the energy,* Leon thought with a flat expression. Bored, he took out his phone, tucked in under his seat, and began to surf through the net. The professor was going on about his philosophy with cats, anyway. It didn't sound like it was following any of the course's criteria so he continued to flip through his messages. That being said, he couldn't help but wonder if Professor Karpusi earned his post-doctorate degree in philosophy

through some wacky application of cats. He'd be damned if that were the case. If getting a post-doctorate degree was that easy, anyone might as well have been doing it.

But, in the end, the class continued on without any follow-up. A few students even got up and left, grumbling something about how they were sure they wouldn't miss anything if they only came to class to take the tests.

Halfway through the lecture, Leon noticed the professor was practically begging for a chair. Since it was a medium-sized lecture hall, there were no seats provided on the direct set. Then again, if the professor sat down, Leon had a feeling he would crash and burn right then and there.

*Oh, well*, he thought. *Might as well see if there's anything to be had*. But in all seriousness, he was starting to think this class was a waste of his money and time. How Cheng was able to double major in a subject such as philosophy was beyond him. If these were the generics, what would he expect if he delved deeper into topic?

Leon didn't wait around to find out. After another grueling twenty minutes of getting nowhere with his notes, he became lost in his *Hetalia Fantasia* game. Pride prevented him from leaving—that and the nagging fact that he would be throwing money away by walking out.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Emil honestly didn't know why he was here; he assumed Leon felt the same way. Only a little while ago, he remembered agreeing to go over to Yong Soo and Charles' dorm room to play an online role-playing game when catastrophe struck.

Apparently what had happened was that Yong Soo's computer had crashed in the middle of playing *Hetalia Fantasia*. When that mess was realized and recognized, Emil and Leon had been playing cooperatively which, in turn, had dragged them into this mess.

In Eliatha University, in relation to the size of the campus, there were three main locations where information technology booths were set up. One of them happened to be located in Sapphire Hall on the first floor, and that was where Yong Soo had forced Emil and Leon into helping him drag his desktop over.

"This is ridiculous, Yong Soo!" Emil cried as he lugged a box of wires in front of Leon. "Why in the world are we carrying your junk?"

"It's not junk!" the hyper-active computer science major snapped. "It's precious equipment—custom-ordered!" And that meant everything was custom-built. In another life, Emil may have been impressed that Yong Soo had managed to bring his desktop complete with specially modified speakers, a gaming mouse, gaming headphones, and a dual screen monitor with him to his dorm. Of course, being that it was custom-made, there was a plethora of unnecessary details like blue backlights and extra cooling fans. All the excess weight made the desktop incredibly heavy. As of now, Yong Soo and Leon were barely able to carry it to the I.T. building.

"I swear, Yong Soo," Leon growled as he tried to keep his end of the desktop propped, "if this turns out to be a waste of time, I'm chucking your stupid computer into the pond."

"If you do that, I'll hack your account and infest it with malware," Yong Soo threw back.

Leon, in turn, smirked and flicked his head back. "Try that, and I'll set my own viruses your way. How do you like your health? Influenza or food poisoning—"

"Guys, shut up and keep walking," Emil grunted. He had been wearing an unenthusiastic frown ever since arriving at Gold Hall; he didn't need any other reason to deepen the wrinkles on his face. The only thing that would have made this worse was if Charles was with them. Luckily for trio, the pompous snob was visiting one of his professors at his office hours.

Eventually they made it to the I.T. building, a snug little extension of Sapphire Hall's main lounge located on the other side of the front entrance. A few signs led the way, and in time, they came across a door with the words "INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY" printed on a plaque in white lettering against a black background.

Honestly, the insides of the room was somewhere close to pitiful to downright depressing: the insides of the room was adorned with a monochromatic gray shade down to the computers, wiring, and even the staffs' uniform. There was only one staff member present in the room, and he already looked too preoccupied to look over at the freshmen's problems.

"A-hem," Leon cleared his throat. That was enough to get the man's attention. After that little

sound, he looked up from his computer and adjusted the rectangular-framed glasses on his head. In Emil's personal opinion, he looked like a stereotypical I.T. worker: prim hair cut, glasses, average athletic physique, and a slightly weary look in his otherwise brimming blue eyes.

"Can I help you three?" he asked in a smooth voice. Emil rather like the sound of his voice—sure that sounded weird, but he had the right to be entitled to his opinions.

"My desktop's busted," Yong Soo immediately told him as he and Leon lifted up the computer and placed it straight onto the main desk. The employee clearly wasn't expected that; he had to blink a few times and even took off his glasses as if in disbelief. When he had recovered from his brief spell, he took a breath and furrowed his eyebrows.

"Well," he breathed, "did you set up an appointment?"

Yong Soo blinked. "Scuse me?"

"An appointment," the employee repeated. He was now standing up, and Emil could read his nametag. "Eduard" was his name.

Eduard continued. "You need an appointment if I'm not doing Internet or registration setups—especially for something regarding an actual desktop. Though I have to say, it's got an impressive cooling system. I can see that from the outside."

Flattered, Yong Soo beamed and placed his hands on his hips. It was almost like he had dragged Leon and Emil over here just to display his desktop, similar to an exhibit of sorts. But this was no exhibit, and with the sudden information about needing an appointment, neither Leon nor Emil were looking too pleased.

"Hey, look, we dragged this stupid thing all the way from *Gold Hall*," Leon seethed. "The least you can do is take a look at it."

Eduard blinked. "I'm looking at it right now, and I can see that it's not even set up. You see...this is exactly why you need to make an appointment for this sort of thing. You're not even supposed to bring your desktop over here—"

"Why not?" Leon interrupted. "I see people bringing their laptops over here all the time."

Again Eduard adjusted his glasses. "That's because—on top of making an appointment—it's easier for us to see what the problem is on a first-person level. A desktop is an entirely different scenario: it's too cumbersome and time-consuming to set it back up over here so we usually send someone to visit the student's dorm—I'm assuming you three are freshmen?"

Leon cursed. "Yong Soo, are you kidding me? We brought this damn thing over here for nothing?"

"Hey, I didn't know!" Yong Soo retaliated. "I thought it wasn't a big deal!" He looked back at the I.T. employee. "Look, we're already here. Can you just, you know, let me set it up in the corner? It won't take long, I promise."

"I mean, I suppose I could..." Eduard mumbled, "but it also depends on what the problem might be."

Emil's friend snorted and blew some of his bangs out of his eyes. "He *was* looking at some suspicious sites with po—"

"Pokémon wikis!" Yong Soo burst out.

"What?" everyone collectively gaped.

"Wikis sometimes have cookies and little viruses," Yong Soo quickly said. "It was probably from one of my many researching trips!"

Emil was less than convinced. "Right."

"Er, very well," Eduard sighed. "I'll take a look."

Leon rolled his eyes. "At least *someone* here is competent."

"Yeah!" Yong Soo joined in. "The desktop's already here so it makes sense that we should be allowed to—"

"I wasn't talking about you, dipshit," Leon frowned. "I was talking about Eduard."

"Eduard?" the Korean blinked.

Leon pointed straight at the I.T.'s nametag. "It says it right on the front, idiot."

"Oh. I was just testing you."

Emil sighed. He wondered how long this process was going to be taking.

---

While setting up the desktop, Leon decided to make some small talk with Eduard. It turned out that Eduard was a computer science major just like Yong Soo, except he was a third-year undergraduate now.

"Wow, so only one more year to go," Leon whistled. "So you, like, have any tips for gamer boy over here?"

Eduard chuckled. "Considering he made it to Eliatha University, I'd say he doesn't have to do more than study hard, practice his coding, and basically...just love doing what he does. If you don't enjoy coding, you won't get very far in your classes, I can tell you that much."

Leon looked over at his friend. "Did you get that down, Yong Soo?"

"It's almost plugged in," Yong Soo replied, misunderstanding the question.

Emil face-palmed.

Leon's head hung back. "Lost cause." He looked back at Eduard. "So what's it like working at I.T.?"

Eduard laughed. "It's busier than I make it look. You actually run around quite a bit when you're on call in the classroom buildings. Today I'm stationed over here by the resident halls, but the classrooms are where the real work comes into play.

"Basically, when an instructor needs help setting up electronic devices around the school, or if there's trouble-shooting or connection problems, we get called to the specified building with the equipment needed. It involves quite a bit of running around, but for beginners, the job's not very difficult since the upperclassmen tell them what to do."

Right after he finished, Yong Soo stood up with his face beaming as always. His amount of energy distantly reminded Emil of Mathias; he was always smiling and looking for something to distract

himself with.

"It's booted up," he said.

"Right, then, let's have a look." Eduard proceeded to run through Yong Soo's virus scans for anything suspicious. First, he went through a short one. Then, with Yong Soo's permission, he proceeded to do a thorough search through the main applications. "Hmm. So you told me your computer crashes whenever you try to gain access to the Internet?"

"I think so," Yong Soo replied. "But it's the only application I really open up. Just about all of my programs run on the Internet in some way."

"Okay, I'll see what I can do."

These concepts were foreign to Emil, but he quietly leaned over Leon's shoulder and watched as Eduard opened up a text file and began running through scripts of commands and strings. None of it made sense to him in the slightest. In the eyes of a non-coding expert, all Emil could see were letters and the occasional numbers. He might as well have been staring at a brick wall.

"He's trying to find any weird breaks in the code before looking into the Internet applications," Leon explained, sensing his friend's incomprehensibility.

Emil glowered. "I knew that. What am I supposed to say?"

Leon chuckled. "You were staring off. I just thought you might have been lost was all."

For the next few minutes, Eduard was busy scrolling through lines of codes while the scan was initiating. To pass the time, Leon asked Yong Soo if he recognized any of the commands.

"Mm, it's pretty simple if I had a pinpoint focus," he said, thoughtfully rubbing his chin. "You see this command accesses a special file with this 'file gain access' command. You can tell the computer where to draw out a file if it's inside of a directory. And...well, it's kind of hard to explain without pulling up my computer to a business management major."

"Oh, you're a business management major?" Eduard spoke up from the desktop screen.

"That's right," Leon replied.

Eduard smiled. "You're pretty knowledgeable in the basics of coding for someone not in the engineering school."

"That's because my cousin is good with computers. He went here, you know."

"Oh?"

"Uh-huh," Leon yawned. He had previously stayed up late to surf his online updates. "He graduated a few years ago, though."

"Hmm. What major was he?"

"Stats and probability as well as philosophy. He was a double-major."

"That's pretty impressive," Eduard complimented.

"He is."

Emil sighed. "There he goes again."

"Oh?" Suddenly, Eduard looked closely at the computer screen. The rest of the students followed.

"Huh," the I.T. employee mused. "Looks like you *do* have malware, Yong Soo."

"A-Ah..." He wasn't sounding too happy, and he even averted his eyes away. Was it guilt that he was feeling, Emil wondered?

Eduard circled the desktop cursor around a particular file under a page in the Internet directory. "Right now I can conclude that whatever problem you have is located through an address in your Internet history. So it's not a program on your computer that was corrupt, it was through the net, itself. That means we'll have to do a thorough scan before you can log onto the Internet again."

Yong Soo's face fell. "A *thorough* scan?" he repeated. "You don't mean..."

"I'm afraid we'll have to run a full scan," Eduard said, adjusting his glasses. "But you shouldn't do it here. It will be easier to take this back to your dorm room and run it there. These things can take up to ten hours depending on how much data is stored in your computer. If you have anything important, I highly recommend backing up anything in the case the virus begins corrupting any hardware."

He looked like he was just about finished when he stood up and stopped. "Oh, and if something goes wrong when you try to gain access to the Internet again, don't hesitate to contact the I.T. department—by appointment, of course. That way, your friends won't be mad at you." Emil and Leon threw Yong Soo dagger looks in response.

"Er, thanks," Yong Soo mumbled. "So that was it?"

"That's all I can recommend to you without ripping out the guts of your computer," Eduard said. "As an employee, it's against our policy to physically modify or inspect the hardware in students' computers and laptops."

"This blows," Leon sighed. "So we have to take everything back."

"Actually..." Eduard showed the students to one of the I.T. room's corners. "We can lend you a CPU cart—"

"Yes," Leon immediately said.

Emil raised an eyebrow. He wasn't sure what a CPU cart was, but by context alone, he assumed it was designed for carrying desktops like Yong Soo's around.

"The catch is, one of you needs to lend me your E-card," Eduard added. "It's just insurance so I know you'll bring it back when you're done with it."

Leon and Emil looked at each other. "Well, Yong Soo needs his E-card to get back into Gold Hall," Leon said. "I suppose I can lend mine's out."

Emil blinked. He was sure his friend would make at least a joke like "Emil give him your E-card," but to his surprise, Leon selflessly handed Eduard his E-card without any resistance. What was this?

"We should help Kimchi-Breath clean up the wires, yeah?" Leon suggested.

"Uh, y-yeah," Emil stuttered, his head still shaken after Leon's brief act of kindness.

After sorting the cables and wires back into the box, Leon and Yong Soo had tied the desktop onto the CPU cart. Yong Soo volunteered to drag the CPU cart back to his dormitory while Leon hung onto the monitor; just like before, Emil was responsible for carrying the box.

"Thanks again, Eduard," Leon said before leaving. "I mean that for Yong Soo, too. He's a stubborn ass."

"That's fine. I'm used to it," he chuckled in response. "Take care now."

"Same to you," Leon waved and went to catch up with his friends. When he did meet up with Yong Soo and Emil, he delivered a hard kick to Yong Soo's backside.

"Ack!" he cried. "Leon, what the—! I could have dropped my desktop!"

Emil groaned and silently watched as Leon spat. As his friend continued to point fingers at Yong Soo, he slowly began to walk behind them until the two were at a reasonable distance away—just in case someone mistook him for hanging out with a bad crowd.

"...and what in Eliatha were you thinking bringing the whole damn computer all the way here?!" Leon continued to fume. "I've got way better things to do than to watch you work out your tech problems!"

"You mean like texting on your phone or surfing all day long?" Emil muttered to himself. It was a good thing he was far enough away from them so Leon couldn't hear.

Leon sighed and looked back. When he saw how far away Emil was, he stopped to wait for him. So he was going to walk with him back to Gold Hall instead of dumping his problems on Yong Soo.

"Hey, Emil," he said, his voice returning to normal. Emil was surprised at how he could pull that off: one moment, he would be overwhelmed with emotion, the next, he would be as dull as a cardboard cutout. He often tried practicing it with Lukas, but little bursts of emotion would leak out through his cracks, and Leon knew damn well how to get to them.

"So after we get our laptops, what are you planning on doing?" Leon asked him.

Emil scrunched his face. His stomach had been churning at an empty streak ever since leaving the I.T. building. Thank the gods he hadn't gotten hungry while they were over there. It would have been embarrassing. "I think I'll go to the D.C.," he said to that thought.

"Oh, yeah? Me, too."

Emil wrinkled his brow. He was thinking that there was something off about the way his friend said that, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

"Hey, you two! Hurry up!"

Leon narrowed his eyes at Yong Soo's command. Emil knew him well enough that he loathed being told what to do by arrogant loud-mouths. He could relate.

"Stupid guy thinks he can boss us around," he hissed. "The guy's annoying sometimes."

"Sometimes," Emil echoed.

"I hope he doesn't want to eat with us after we leave."

Emil laughed.

---

Luckily for the two of them, Yong Soo wasn't in the mood for eating. Aside having a desktop, he had an equally capable laptop. Leon had mentioned that aside the few basic bodily functions, the only thing Yong Soo did on a daily basis was play computer games—nonstop.

"Won't he kill himself by doing that?" Emil asked on their way to the Bonnefoy Dining Commons. "Like, didn't someone from Taiwan die from playing games for too long?\*"

"Don't worry," Leon assured him. "Mei told me about that. At least Yong Soo's not some obese closet perv. Like I said, he's pretty fit."

"Mm, okay." Emil could hardly complain as long as his associates weren't dropping off the shelf like flies.

When the two friends arrived at the dining commons, as always, they pulled out their wallets and handed the receptionists their E-cards. Only this time...

"Crap," Leon said. "I cannot seem to find my...E-card."

Emil blinked. "What are you talking about? You never leave it at—" He stopped.

*The CPU cart.*

"Ooh, this is terrible," Leon seemed to whine. To Emil's disgust and disturbance, he began to lean on his shoulder like a child.

"Ice, what am I going to do? I don't have my E-card, but I'm soooo hungry..."

"You—!" Emil gasped. "So *that's* why you lent your E-card to Eduard! You wanted to mooch a meal swipe off of me!"

"But Icey..." Leon continued to whine. "I'm hungry..."

"Idiot!" Emil was fuming. If he forgot his E-card, he was sure he would be completely embarrassed. Leon didn't look any different (except for being hungry), but Emil was sure that if he ever forgot his E-card, he would be able to count on his friend. Disturbing or not, he finally looked past his friend's behavior and offered to sacrifice an extra meal swipe for his friend.

"Just this once, got it?" Emil growled as they walked inside the dining commons. "You owe me."

Leon laughed. Again he had reverted back to his stoic, mischievous self. "Hey, at least you don't have to go all the way back to Sapphire Hall and drop off the CPU cart. I think that's worth a meal swipe, don't you think so?"

His friend gave no reply. Instead, he parted ways and went off to see what the soup of the day was. Leon sighed and decided to look for a table in advance. He would apologize to Emil when he had a full stomach.

\* True story



## Chapter 12

If Emil had any way to describe the scene that lay before him, he would have put it as one of those anime conventions that Leon had taken him to once upon a time ago. Mix that in with an outdoor garden party and slap a sticker of a weird residential assistant alacrity over it, and you would have what was known as Eliatha University's Club Rush Day.

Left and right, flyers were flying—

*(No wonder they call them "flyers," Emil thought. )*

—members were grinning, and young freshmeat such as Emil and Leon were timidly trying to crowd around the middle of the aisles to avoid ghastly paper guts, contagious hand germs, and wild members a little too desperate to get new recruits for their topic-centered cults.

That being said, it was really an exaggeration. Emil wasn't as enthusiastic as his Cantonese counterpart, but he was interested in seeing what sorts of people shared the same interests as he did. At one of the tables near the front, there was a video game club that only focused on fighter tournaments instead of plain video game discussion. Speaking of which, there was also a club designated just for video game discussion—there was no actual video game-playing involved.

Yong Soo had been drawn towards the more computerized and engineering-based area of the club fair. Emil and Leon saw him every now and then, and every time he returned, he was holding a new flyer, munching on a different piece of candy, or running his mouth about how the president of the Asian Engineers Association had a weird lisp when he talked.

"I could do a better job than him when talking about the club. I know it!" Yong Soo had told the pair during his seventh return.

"Then why don't you?" Leon asked, his voice sounding borderline annoyed. It was similar to how sometimes a father would get irritated at his son for asking too many stupid-sounding questions. Objectively there was no such as a child asking a stupid question, but this was one exception to Yong Soo's pestering.

To Leon's question (and challenge), Yong Soo placed his hands on his hips and beamed with a radiant light—which was actually the light reflecting off a metal sculpture in the background. "I'll wait until the current president graduates and take over as the best A.E.A. president this school will have ever known!"

Emil's friend didn't seem to care if he became the president of the student council for all his deadpan expression was worth. "If you think you can do it, then do it," he said and went on his way. Emil wordlessly followed behind, leaving Yong Soo to bask in his sunshine fantasies.

"So what kind of clubs are you thinking about joining?" Emil asked his friend as they passed the robotics club.

"My cousins were able to get through with only one club each," Leon replied as he scanned a tennis club. They were in the sports section now. A few jocks and tall-built athletes passed them by. Emil would have goggled if they happened to be freshman. It should have been illegal for humans to be so muscular and tall at only eighteen and nineteen—some being as young as seventeen.

"You've got any clubs in mind, Ice?" Leon then asked him in turn. He hadn't given his answer, yet.

Still, it didn't hurt for Emil to start planning out his extra curricular activities. As something of an awkward social outcast, Lukas had completely vouched for not joining any clubs when he had been an undergraduate. However, due to Mathias' outgoing nature in contrast, he had somehow ended up joining the interior design club. Amazingly enough it turned out that Lukas had a keen eye for composition, convenience, and practicality when it came to rearranging furniture. His contributions had netted Eliatha's interior design club a national award of recognition in the annual interior design competition that year.

"My brother joined the interior design club—against his will," Emil put at the end. "Mathias made him attend."

"Oh. So that means they were in the same club together," Leon concluded. As they passed by the newscasters club, he swiped two peppermints, one for him and the other for Emil. "You know, the more I think about it, our interests aren't too close together—or our personalities, at least."

"No." Emil unwrapped the cellophane packaging and popped the peppermint into his mouth. "So what interests do you think you're going to go after?"

A small smile cracked from his friend's mouth. "I've always liked cinematography stuff. If they have some sort of filming club, I was thinking about taking that on. A special effects department or even a club would be better. Or choreographing."

"You would be that type." He sighed, rolling the minty candy around in on his tongue. It wouldn't be long before he lost interest in trying to keep the peppermint clacking along his teeth. He would start crunching it down eventually.

Leon nudged his elbow. "So you're going to just join the interior design club?"

"Why not?"

"That's kind of boring. You should do something different. Like, Mei joined the fashion design club. Cheng joined the tea club."

Emil did a double take. "They have a club like that?" He was about to laugh when Leon jabbed his ribs.

"Don't laugh," he said in a low voice. "It's actually like a totally elite club. It's only for the people who can, like, appreciate tea. You have to go through some kind of rite and passage to get in. Even then, you can't join it like a normal club. Someone has to invite you." He wistfully sighed. "It'd be kind of cool if they had something like that for dark martial arts or something."

*Dark martial arts?* Emil wondered. *What sort of stuff could that involve?*

"Come on, Ice," Leon said pointing out into the middle of the table-filled and flyer-ridden path down the scholar lane. "There are *hundreds* of clubs here. You've gotta find one that's your calling right?"

"Er..."

"And try to stay out of the clubs that are geared towards your major—unless you're desperate. You're going to probably be working with the same people you work with in your upper division classes."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It just gets boring."

Emil couldn't argue with that, but he didn't think it would be too much of a problem, though. Some of the social science, arts, and humanities majoring students could be a little overwhelming. Leon certainly was.

"If I find something that interests me, I'll think about it, okay?"

"No."

Emil blinked. "I'm sorry, what?" He was then met with two fingers pointing directly at his eyeballs.

"You don't 'think about it,' Ice. You *do*. Now when you find something that you know you'll like, you take that chance and go all out, got it?"

"Leon...seriously....Your enthusiasm's a little too much for me." He almost felt bad. His friend was only trying to encourage him to be more active. He wouldn't be there forever. Yet here he was possibly thinking about meeting things halfway. Clearly the students who got accepted into Eliatha University didn't approach things halfway. No. They finished and went above and beyond. Emil might have only gotten accepted purely by his exotic nationality and academic records.

"Promise me that you'll sign up for at least one club, Ice," Leon said looking him straight in the eyes as he lowered his fingers. "You can always drop out of them if you can't take it, but at least follow up with one. If your creepy-ass brother could do it, then so can you."

"I..." Emil swallowed some of the sweet, minty saliva swashing in his mouth. "Fine, I'll promise. Happy?"

"Good," Leon smiled. "Now that we've got that cleared up, let's blow this joint. It's all athletics, anyway."

Along the way, Emil was beginning to crunch on his peppermint, the little coin-shaped candy shattering into shards of minty white pieces.

In time, the two friends found their way to the more visually and studio-based artistic clubs. This was where clubs centered around theater, film, arts, and crafts were located. While browsing, Emil saw a colorful display of cupcakes sitting on trays. A young woman was handing out cupcakes to anyone who collected a flyer while the man next to her was shouting out lists of potential pastries made in their club.

Somewhere else, Emil spotted the ever-popular manga club. He remembered Academy W's manga club. It was...interesting to say the least. A bunch of eccentrics often hung out around a desolate classroom and discussed characters, ships, and styles. Sometimes they would host anime film nights where the advisor let them set up a projector to watch the latest flicks. Leon had joined the club. Once, he had dragged Emil to a meeting. Some of the female classmates joked around saying he and Emil should have been a couple.

*Stupid shipping fantasies*, Emil thought to himself. *How would they like it if I started pairing them off with people they only just talk to on a semi-regular basis?* The thought of putting himself in that kind of position again was ridiculous, so he completely bypassed the club without so much as glancing at the people. May the gods forbid there was a cosplay club that was separate from the manga club.

Then, Leon began to drag on Emil's arm and led him past an acrylic club and a graphic design club. "Ice! I found it!" he exclaimed. "They've got a cinema club!"

Sure enough, there was a club tacked with cardboard cutouts of old-school film reels, cameras, and lights. The people manning the booths seemed friendly enough.

"Hi, guys!" a man with wide-rimmed glasses and blonde hair said. "You guys interested in joining the cinematography club?" Emil remembered who he was. He was on the bus when they were going errand shopping. His name was something like Alfred Jones.

"I'm interested," Leon said with an even smile. He was never one to get too excited around people he didn't trust. That said something about his relationship with Emil.

"Cool!" Alfred grinned. "Why doncha take a flyer and sign up right here on this clipboard? Just your name and E-mail address is fine."

Eliatha University, like many college and university databases, had their own personal e-mail system. Eliatha University had E-mail with a capital "E" that stood for Eliatha mail. Most E-mail addresses went by the first letter of a student's first name and their entire last name. Sometimes there were numbers. Emil was one of those fortunate enough to have such an eccentric name that he didn't need to add on numbers.

After Leon finished filling out the sign-up form, he took two lollipops: one for Emil and the other for himself.

"Thanks," Emil shortly said, sheepishly taking the little treat. He felt ashamed that he was taking the clubs' candies without bothering to sign up. It wasn't his fault Leon bothered to always take two every time.

Then, Alfred leaned past Leon and looked over at Emil. "Is your friend going to sign up?"

"Er," Leon looked behind him, "no, he's looking for something else."

"You sure?" the jock pressed. "He's got a good face. We can cast him for all sorts of things."

"I-I'm not cut out for acting," Emil quickly said. "I'd just mess things up."

"He's modest," his friend commented.

"Mm, okay," Alfred finally relented, "but if you ever change your mind, stop by the second black box Thursday at six, okay?"

"S-Sure." Emil just wanted to get out of there. This was the first time he had approached a club booth and talked with one of the vendors. Even though he knew he wouldn't be joining this club, his heart was beating at an alarm rate. If this was how it was going to be, he wondered how he would act when he finally found a club that interested him.

At this point, it would have seemed his friend noticed his uneasiness. "Well, nice meeting you," he said and shook Alfred's hand. "I'm Leon, by the way."

"Alfred," the vendor attendant returned. So Emil was right about his name. "I'll be seeing you Thursday then. We'll send out an E-mail to everyone so make sure you check your inbox."

"Will do," Leon closed off and walked away with his friend and flyer. "Ah, Ice, that could have gone better."

"What were you expecting?" Emil snapped. "There's no way I'd be cut out for a club like that!"

"No, I mean, you've gotta, like, work on your people skills. Even out in the field, you need to be able to communicate with your backers and such, right?"

Emil snorted. "I mean, I guess, but I'm not there yet."

"Better get on it," Leon said, nudging him in the arm again. "Time flies, like, seriously."

"Got it, got it. Let's just—"

"Oh! Like, why don't you join the choir club?"

Emil blinked and froze in place. "Choir club?"

"Yeah! You've got a nice voice, don't you? It'll be a great way to meet some new people!"

"Leon," he said with a distinct frown, "you're really not being serious, are you?"

"I'm totally serious! You can sing!"

Joining a club such as choir sounded absurd. It wasn't fun and games. It required hours of vocal training on top of musical ears that Emil just didn't have.

"If you want me to join so badly, why don't you join yourself?" Bad move. The question just spilt out of his mouth like running water, and it was too late to take it back. To make things worse, Leon's eyes lit up.

"That's not a bad idea."

Emil frowned. "Weren't you the one who was just saying I need to work on my people skills?"

"Yeah, well, you've got more than three years for that stuff."

"And weren't you the one who was saying time flies by fast?" Emil muttered under his breath as Leon dragged him towards the choir club's booth.

When they found the vocals section of the club fair, Leon and Emil's eyes lit up when they saw Eduard from the I.T. department sitting at the booth.

"Oh! Good afternoon, you two!" the computer science major greeted them with a smile. "How's everything going?"

"Good," Leon returned with his own smile. "I didn't know you were part of this club."

To Emil's surprise, Eduard flicked back a wave of his blonde bangs. He looked rather flashy today. It was almost out of character. "I bet you didn't know I was the president of this club, did you?"

Leon cracked a smile. "No, I didn't think you'd have the time. I thought I.T. keeps you busy as it is."

"It does," Eduard weakly laughed. "Actually, all of the head members in this club are busy people. I think you might know Toris, correct?"

"Yeah. He's the other R.A. on our floor."

"He's part of this club, too. He's the vice president, in fact."

"You don't say," Emil commented. Then he watched as Eduard folded his hands across the desk. "Are you possibly considering joining the choir club?"

"Emil needs a club, still," Leon told him. "I told him I'd join this club so he wouldn't be left out, but if you and Toris are going to be there, then maybe..."

"Leon!" Emil snapped. "What the heck! You're not going to bail out on me, are you?!"

"Eduard's a cool guy," his friend smirked. "I think you'll do fine on your own. Besides, I really didn't think I'd be able to manage two clubs during my first year anyway."

"You—!"

"Er, I'm sorry. Is there something I can do to help?" Eduard asked, adjusting his glasses.

Not wanting to cause any further trouble, Emil settled down and took a deep breath. "No. There's nothing wrong. Um...if it's not too much trouble, I'd like to sign up, then."

"You will? Great! Just sign here with your E-mail, and we'll notify you when the first meeting's coming up."

As Emil looked down, he noticed that there were a handful of names already put down. He nearly made a face when he saw Charles' name on the list of all people. Leon saw it, too.

"Ooh. You're going to have some fun with that, huh?" he snickered.

"Shut up," Emil grumbled and wrote down his name. When he gave the sign-up sheet back to the president, he nearly breathed in relief when he saw there weren't any candies to be offered. Leon wouldn't be able to let his gluttony get the better of this situation. Instead, Eduard handed him an unsharpened black pencil with silver music notes imprinted all over the surface.

"Cool pencil," Leon whistled. "Maybe I should have signed up." This earned him a pair of lavender dagger eyes from his friend. Emil for one wasn't going to let his friend get his only keepsake from the club he had signed up for. So, he pocketed his unsharpened pencil and thanked Eduard for letting him sign up.

"I look forward to hearing your singing voice, Emil," Eduard said with a business-like smile.

"Uh-huh," was all he could come up with before deciding to leave. Another group of students had begun wandering to the booth.

"He's a bit weird, that guy," Leon said when they were out of hearing range.

"Who *isn't* weird in this school?"

"True."

"I found you guys!"

Emil and Leon stopped and turned around. It was Yong Soo again. He looked like his arms were about to explode from all the foam fingers, flyers, and sweets he had gotten from the passing vendors.

"Dammit, Yong Soo," Leon spat. "You're just like my old man, you know that?" He cursed under his breath in what sounded like Cantonese. "I swear, both of you have no shame when it comes to free stuff. At least be *tactful* when you go around grabbing every free piece of candy and slip of

paper you come across."

"Like you're one to talk," Emil sneered from the sidelines. In the time he had known Leon, he tended to be something of an extreme cheapskate when he wasn't showing off. That would have explained the constant snatching of candies and freebies from the club booths.

"It's free, and we're starving college students!" Yong Soo exclaimed.

Leon rolled his eyes. "We live on campus, idiot. You don't know what it's like—yet. Forget that. Did you find any clubs you wanted to join?"

"Yeah! They had this cool-looking animation club and an international studies club that I was thinking about. Oh, and the gaming club sounded cool."

"So much for the A.E.A. Sounds like you're going to have your hands full," Leon commented.

"It's none of our business," Emil piped up. "Are we done here? I need to write up a bio-lab."

"I think I'll check out a few more things," his roommate said. "You sure you're done? You didn't want to check out the interior design club?"

Emil huffed. "You said you wanted me to try something different so I'm trying something different, aren't I, Leon?"

"Right," he laughed. "Okay, then. I'll see you back at the dorm. Later."

"Bye." Emil and Leon parted ways in front of the scholar lane that was a bridge between the dormitories and classrooms. Along the way was a scenic route along the pond that would normally serve as a good place to study. Emil might have even thought about studying outside today if it wasn't because of the club fair.

*Another time, maybe, he thought as he headed back to Opal Hall. Or, maybe if Lili or Michelle is free, I can see if they want to go to the library.*

Lukas had mentioned something about studying at the library being a useful asset to one's focus. A different environment could mean fewer distractions. Coupled with the fact that Mei and Cheng has said studying with others could prove to be beneficial, a study group at the library was the best option—at least, Emil hoped that would be a good asset. There was really only one way to find out for certain.

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was the gym all over again.

*Taken, taken, taken.*

Blurry faces, cartons of milk (*Why milk?* Emil wondered), and students clustered in separate tables, armchairs, and benches littered the library.

This hadn't been Emil's first time to Eliatha University's main library. Lukas had brought him here during a few visits to show him the best places for studying. Not all situations were perfect where studying in the dorms was the best option.

"You can get distracted," his brother had told him. "And then there are your roommates to worry about." At the time, Mathias had been in the kitchen helping their parents out with the breads. Emil had to assume Lukas was referring to his old friend and freshmeat roommate.

"If the student lounge is hosting events, just go to the library," Lukas continued. "The higher you go up the floors, the quieter it gets."

That part was true. On the first floor of the main library, there was a café for students looking for a place to hang out and talk to instructors, friends, or colleagues. Following the first floor was the second floor where some classrooms were located around the perimeter of the library. As a result, there were students coming in and out of the doors, elevators, and stairwells. Only the third and fourth floors were the best ones for studying.

Unlike Eliatha University's neighboring school in Chottsyt\*, the library's view consisted of the surrounding forest on the hill the school was built on, along with the surrounding town below. There were no oceans, rivers, or lakes to distract the students, was what one of the founding deans had mentioned a while back.

*Not that it would matter to me*, Emil thought. He liked to pride himself on the fact that he didn't get too lost in thought like his Cantonese counterpart. He knew what he was supposed to do and when to do it. That thing happened to be writing up his biology lab.

It didn't take long for Emil to find a cozy spot isolated in an obscure corner of the fourth floor. Granted it would take longer to go back to the ground floor, but at least he had some peace and quiet all to himself.

When it came to biology, those with concentrated majors in the biological sciences had to take an additional lab course on top of their lectures. Those only taking the course for general education or elective purposes were free to only attend lectures and discussions sections where required.

"You really sure you want to go the bio route, Ice?" Mathias had asked him when he told him his intended major. "You know you're not going to have a life. Lukas spent most of his nights writing up the bio labs during freshmen year."

"I've heard. I'll be fine. If my brother can do it, so can I."

Mathias had shrugged. "If you say so."



Since there weren't any distractions to be had, Emil had gotten fairly well along on his write-up when he heard some female voices whispering not too far away.

"...Come on! Just talk to him! It's not that hard!"

Emil wrinkled his forehead and looked down at his lab report. He didn't need to pay any attention to those little side conversations. From the sound of things, it was just like high school: a girl was too shy to confess her affections for a guy, and in the end, her friend had to end up doing it. With Eliatha University having over 7,000 students with 1,500 of them being freshmen, the identity of the said parties were none of his business.

But then...

"Um..."

Emil's head shot up, his eyes as large as golf balls. The last thing he expected was for the girl to be referring to *hi*—

"O-Oh. It's you Lili," he almost said in relief. What was wrong with him? He shouldn't have been so flustered like that. She probably just wanted to ask him *that*.

"Um, Emil," the timid zoology student barely whispered, "do you want to maybe...study with us?" She looked fleetingly at his papers that were nearly completed. He had already gotten through the procedure. "Oh. You're almost done. You don't have to work with us if you don't want to."

"No, that's fine," he said, forcing a fake smile. "Do you need some help?" He looked over her shoulder. "Is Michelle with you?"

In response, Lili gratefully turned around, arms squeezing her textbook, and looked over at her roommate. "She's over there. She wanted to know if you wanted to join us."

"Yeah, I can go over," Emil said. "Beats doing this alone, right?" He threw out that question at the end in hopes that he could make her comfortable.

"I guess," she whispered, lowering her head. She was painfully shy, more so than Emil, himself. It was almost fascinating seeing how he acted like under Leon's supervision. It was only times like this where he met someone shyer than him that he could see this. It was like looking at a different image of himself.

"So you two found a table to yourself?"

"Uh-huh," Lili nodded. "It's this way."

She hurriedly led him to a table along the side of the library with open windows. Since it was well into the afternoon, the sun was directly overhead, so there was no need to worry about any glare getting into their eyes. When everyone was settled down, Emil decided to see how far along his classmates had gotten in their reports.

"So how much have you gotten down?" he asked, looking at his own lab write-up.

"We've finished the objectives and hypothesis so far," Michelle told him. "We've been having some trouble with the procedure part."

Emil agreed. "It's hard to write up your own lab report without plagiarizing. My brother had to go through this kind of stuff."

"Do you think you'd be able to ask your brother for help if you needed it?" Lili asked.

"Um, I guess I could," he wearily replied. "I have a feeling it'll involve some weird compensation, but he'll help me. He's that kind of person." He looked over at her. "What about you? You said your brother was an...accounting major?"

"That's right."

"Oh. I guess there's not much he can help you with there."

"He tries when he can," she faintly smiled. "He's always watching over me when possible."

"Oh." *So he's one of those overprotective types? I should just be glad Lukas is over at the grad school and not hovering over me like some...*

Just then, he felt an ominous presence floating over his shoulders like a ghostly apparition. When he turned around, he had to do a double take. The person nearly looked like Lili, except he was taller with broader shoulders, tight-strung facial features, and a pair of eyes that looked like they could kill.

"Um...H-Hello?" he nervously greeted him. *Crap, crap, crap...He must be Lili's brother. What's his name again? Did Lili ever tell me his name? Oh, gods, where's Leon when I need him?*

"Brother, what are you doing here?" Lili piped up. So Emil's assumption was correct.

"I was looking for you to make sure you're doing alright," he answered in a developing deep voice. Emil couldn't put his voice into words. It was along the lines of the rasp of Mathias' voice combined with the young velvet of Leon's voice. It was a strange combination. "Who is this?" he then asked.

Emil swallowed. Hard.

"This is Emil Steilsson," Lili introduced him. "He's a marine biology major like Michelle. We've known each other for some time."

All he could do was watch in utter petrified fear as her brother peered into his eyes like a green-eyes hawk to a shrew. After a few seconds, he stood down and gave Emil some room to breathe. Even though it was still summer in Eliatha, there was a deathly chill in the air.

"So you think you're hot stuff trying to pick up on my sister, are you?"

"No, sir," Emil said. He didn't like addressing him as "sir" in the slightest, but he didn't know his name. Better to sound like a decently brought-up person than an ignorant asshole.

To his minor relief, Lili tugged on her brother's sleeve. "Brother, he's a nice person. He's been helping me get adjusted to school."

Then, her brother cranked his head like a spring toy soldier and scowled at her. If Emil didn't know any better, he would have thought that he would hit her right then and there.

"Why haven't you been telling me about your friends?" he snapped at her, causing his poor sister to flinch in shock. Emil had to bite down on his tongue to prevent himself from doing the same.

"B-Because..." Ashamed, Lili lowered her head. "I knew you wouldn't let me be friends with a...a boy."

Her brother blinked those hard green eyes of his. "What makes you think that? I'll let you be friends with anyone—"

(He made a hard turn back in Emil's direction.)

"—as long as they have money."

*Money?*

Lili furrowed her thin, delicate eyebrows. "Brother, not that again. Can't I make friends the normal way?"

"Not if it means distracting you from what you're trying to do," he huffed.

"But Emil was going to help me with biology."

Gods, this was awkward, Emil realized. It was like looking at a whining child who wanted to go play on the playground, but her parent—or brother in this case—wouldn't let her because there were "bad" kids on the playground. Emil was apparently the bad kid in this situation.

He brother stubbornly refused to give in. "If you need help, just ask me. I took biology as my elective, remember? I can help you if you need it."

*Oh, gods, Emil miserably thought. Now I really wish Leon was here.*

"But—"

"No buts," he snapped. Just then, a new person entered the table's vicinity. It looked like a librarian.

"Excuse me, but if you can't quiet down, I'm going to have to ask you all to leave," she whispered. "This is the fourth floor, the quiet zone. I shouldn't have to remind you that you need to use indoor voices. There are students who are trying to get some early studying done."

"Sorry," Emil quickly apologized. "Um, maybe I should go, then. I think I'm causing some trouble."

From the looks of things, it looked like Lili's older brother wasn't done with him, but with the librarian watching them, he had no choice.

"You got lucky this time, Steilsson," he growled under his breath. Right before turning away, it looked like Michelle wanted to convince Emil to come back, but with the way things were, it didn't look like he was welcome. He would have to wait until another time before being able to talk to them face to face again.

*Gods, how in Eliatha did I get out of there alive?* he wondered. At least he was on his own two feet, but one thing was for sure: Lili's older brother was like a direct Lukas. In other words, he was overprotective and willing to kill if necessary. At least Lukas was subtler about his death threats. Lili's brother just straight up looked like a young serial killer in the making.

Breathing hard and walking fast, Emil wasted no time scurrying down the stairs all the way to the ground floor. Outside, the club rush fair was still going on, but he had already signed up for a club. With his lab report decently written and nearing completion, he figured he was done for the day. It was time to head back to his dorm.

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"...Holy shit," were the first words that came out of Leon's mouth when Emil so much as mentioned meeting Lili's brother.

"I know, right?" Emil sighed.

His friend blinked. "So, like, you weren't kidding about the whole thing with her brother being like another Lukas." He smirked. "Looks like dating her is out of the question."

"Shut up. I'm not interested in her."

"Ouch. You know, if she was here, I think that would have made her cry."

Emil grunted. "It looked like she was about to in the library. Her brother's a control freak. No wonder she didn't want to tell him about me. I still don't know his name, you know that?"

Leon looked up from his phone. "I can fix that."

"Leon, no."

"Are you sure?" he pressed. "I have connections."

He frowned. "I don't care. If or when Lili feels comfortable sharing with me, then I'll be fine with however long she takes." A faint chill ran up and down his spine like dancing fingers tapping his back. It vaguely reminded him of the time Leon gave him a massage. "I just hope her brother doesn't kill me before that."

That only made his roommate laugh. "Don't worry about it. You've got Lukas. Relax. I'd love to see those two deck it out in a fight. Who do you think would win?"

Emil scrunched his face. "Well, Lukas *is* pretty scrawny."

"What, so you think Lili's brother would win?"

"I don't know. Leon, I don't want to talk about this stuff right now."

"Ah, fine. If it'll give you nightmares, I'll stop."

"I'm not a child, Leon."

"And I'm not your parent," he smirked back. "You always come to me when you have problems."

"I—!" Emil sat up. "I do not!"

Leon rolled his eyes. It was clear that was about to use sarcasm in three...two...one...

"*Sure* you don't."

*Asshole.*

"Oh. I just remembered something," his roommate suddenly said, flipping open his laptop.

"What now?" Emil had just pushed away from his chair. He was thinking about taking a nap when his friend oh-so-kindly interrupted his thoughts.

"EU's gonna to be having a day trip over at Chottsym on Saturday. It's supposed to be nice weather over there. What do you say? Wanna go?"

"Chottsym?" he repeated. He hadn't been there in a while. It might have been nice to see the ocean again after being landlocked for so long. That could be just what he needed to refresh his brain from all the preemptive freshmeat drama. "Sure. Why not?"

"Cool," Leon smiled. "I'll text you the site, then. You have to register online, so don't drag or the spaces will fill up."

"Gotcha."

"So are you done for the day?"

"I was just about to take a nap when you brought the trip up."

"Mm-kay. I'm going to be going out for the rest of the day, then. You won't catch me until dinnertime."

"Fine with me," Emil began to yawn. He needed to drink more water or Lukas would pester him. "It'll be quieter without you here."

Leon gave his friend his iconic smirk. "Heh. Alright. See you later, Ice."

"Uh-huh," he responded and checked his phone for the link. A few minutes later, Leon had left the dormitory and began walking away from the open quad area. At least now the hectic day was over. His lab report was finished, and he could finally get some decent amount of sleep.

## Chapter End Notes

I don't know why, but there was always a carton of milk in my library on numerous occasions. It's because we could eat in our libraries.

\*A province in my fictitious kingdom of Brysogwig. They're both anagrams, but unless you've read one of my obscure series on dA, you'll never know what they stand for.

## Chapter 14

This was inexcusable. Completely inexcusable. Emil's parents didn't pay for Eliatha University's tuition out of their pockets for something like this.

"Sorry, class, but the water piping system is a little screwy so you're just going to have to grin and bear it," the graduate student (also known as the teacher assistant or "T.A." for short) glumly yawned. "There's nothing I can do about it."

Outside, the university's water piping system was chugging away at the lawn, watering the grass like there was no tomorrow. In the peak of later summer, the temperatures were fairly warm, but apparently the time clocks hadn't been adjusted appropriately. On top of that, because the water pipes happened to be built into the walls, the entire room rang with an ear-splitting moan; it sounded along the lines of a building suffering through bad indigestion.

"It's stupid how they do that," Emil told Lili who happened to be in the same lab section as him. That wasn't something her brother wasn't able to change. This was the only lab section available for both their schedules.

"Why?" she asked.

"If they water while the sun's up, the heat's going to cause the water to evaporate right off the grass blades," he explained. "They're just wasting water and killing the grass."

"Oh. I didn't know that."

"Okay, class, so I'm going to be your T.A. for this term," the teacher assistant spoke up from the front. "We're going to get through some quick lab procedures. First of all, how many of you are freshmen?"

Emil, Lili, and a decent amount of students raised their hands.

The graduate student cleared his throat. Now that Emil thought about it, he had an uncanny resemblance to someone he had seen before. He couldn't quite put his finger on who it could have been, but it was on the tip of his tongue. The accent was strangely familiar, too.

"I'm Gupta," the teaching assistant said. "I was born in Egypt but lived in Turkey for some time so if I have an accent, just ask me to clarify. I've been a graduate student of Dr. Adnan's for a while. Give or take four years. My office hours are on the board. Go ahead and copy them down if you haven't already done so." He paused for any of the students to catch up. "And I'm assuming you've all brought your lab coats? Who didn't bring their lab coats or goggles?"

None of the students raised their hands.

"Good," Gupta nodded. "You're going to be needing them for this lab. We were supposed to go over some basic models on atoms, but since Dr. Adnan doesn't like to review the programs, it's not really important yet. You're not going to need to look at the models again until o' chem."

*By "o' chem," he must be referring to organic chemistry,* Emil deduced.

"...And this is the fume hood. Leave it closed unless you're using it. Eye wash station's over there." The teacher assistant paused for any questions. "That's about it. You guys are adults. Most of you, anyway. So any questions?"

No one had questions.

"That makes my job easier," he yawned. "So I'm going to go over a few of the concepts of today's lab..."

For the next half hour or so, the graduate student continued to go over the main points of the lab, what to look out for, and what sort of data he wanted to get.

"And make sure you wear your goggles," he reminded everyone. "If someone walks in and sees the students not wearing any goggles, it looks bad on me. So just do it."

Emil rolled his eyes. It might not have been the most preferable feature of conducting lab experiments, but it was crucial in keeping one's eyesight. If there was a boiling or caustic chemical, any untreated splashes could leave a person blind for life.

The main reason people disliked wearing the safety goggles was because of the suction cup-like feeling over their eyes and the nasty red marks that came afterward. Lukas had mentioned something of the sort to his little brother when doing the labs.

"If you want, I can always give you my old labs," he had offered. "Knowing Adnan, he's too lazy to write up new ones. I have perfect scores, so if you ever need help..."

"Pass," Emil had refused. He wanted to be able to do the labs on his own. It wasn't going to help him if he needed to conduct fieldwork in the future.

Gupta spoke up again. "Look around and remember your seat," he instructed. "You're going to be working with these people for the rest of the term so introduce yourselves and exchange information."

Emil and Lili had sheepish smiles tugging at their lips. They had met prior to the first day of instruction so introductions weren't necessary.

"Have you looked over the procedure?" Emil asked his lab partner.

"Yes," she replied. "Michelle helped me with some of it."

Emil sighed. Ever since that incident in the library with her older brother, he wasn't about to risk his neck over something like that again. If he really needed help, he supposed he could go to the professor's office hours or ask his brother.

*Maybe the professor's more reliable*, he thought. He felt that if he resorted to asking Lukas, he'd end up getting spoon-fed every step of the way.

"Okay. You can begin the lab now," Gupta said. "I'll be walking around if you need anything. When you're done, just tell me, and I'll check you off. Clean up your stations, dry everything off, all that good stuff."

*Sounds typical*, Emil thought. As he and Lili began cleaning the lab equipment, she began to converse with him.

"Um, Emil...?"

He looked her way. "Yes?"

As if ashamed, Lili avoided all possible eye contact with him. Instead, she resorted to wiping down

some of the beakers with a paper towel or labeling the test tubes, but not once did he see her look at him.

"A-About the library thing with my brother...I'm sorry about that."

Emil blinked. "Oh. No, that's okay. It wasn't your fault. I probably shouldn't have—"

"No, it *is* my fault," she cut him off and let out a small sigh. "If I wasn't so shy and weak, my brother wouldn't have to be like that. I—Oh!" She looked up. "I've never told you his name, have I?"

"Er, not that I recall, no," he smugly replied.

She bowed her head again. "I'm sorry. I was so caught up with everything that I forgot. His name is Vash. Vash Zwingli."

Emil forced a nervous chuckle. "I don't think I'm going to forget his name anytime soon."

Lili flushed pink. He noticed she was continuing to clean the beakers even though they were completely free of fingerprints.

"Lili, we have a lab to do, remember?"

She jumped. "Sorry," she apologized again.

"You don't have to always apologize. There's nothing to be sorry about."

Again, Lili flushed a deeper shade of pink. She didn't say anything to him after that. Every now and then, she would tell Emil some measurements for collecting data; other than that, her lips remained sealed.

*At least she's not apologizing left and right anymore,* he noticed.

Lukas had told Emil that the ones who were efficient in labs were always finished first. "The smart ones always know what they're doing," he told him. "Unless they have friends or needed to retake the class."

Emil remembered lowering his eyes when he had said that. "Of course you'd like to call yourself the competent one."

"There's nothing wrong with that," his brother had responded without the slightest hint of shame. He could afford to be like that. He was a medical student at the graduate school, after all.

By pleasant surprise, Emil and Lili were the first ones to finish with their labs. Once they had cleaned up all of their equipment and finished filing in their data charts, Gupta came over to sign them off.

"Let's see," he murmured. "Everything's dry, the station's clear, pre-labs are done...Good job, you two." He then took out a green-inked pen and began to sign his name in their lab notebooks. "See you next week, you two," he finished off and went over to another station for inspection.

"That was good," Emil said when he took off his lab coat. "My brother was always the first one to finish his labs, you know."

"Oh," was all Lili commented.



"He told me to try picking competent partners." He made a little frown. "If you ended up with someone bad, the experiments could go very wrong, I've been told. But...you're a good partner. I think we'll be able to work very well together this term."

Lili bowered her head until her bangs covered her eyes. "Thank you, Emil."

"It's nothing," he replied as they left the laboratory together. "Um, so, does your brother live on-campus?"

She nodded. "We were thinking about living off-campus once I finished my first year here. He's only staying this year to make sure I'm alright."

Emil swallowed. "Is he...? He's not coming here to pick you up or anything, is he?"

To his surprise, Lili shook her head. "I told him Michelle was going to come pick me up."

"Is she?"

"No. She has a discussion class."

*So she lied.*

"Why would you tell him that, then?" he asked. He noticed her tightening her fists. It wasn't a hateful gesture; it was more frustrating if anything. He had been in that position many times, too.

"I just wanted to be able to do things on my own for once," she breathed. "Vash has always been there for me when I was in trouble. But...I'm taking a different career path than him. We're not going to be together forever. I have to learn how to live on my own one step at a time. We're already in college. If I can't start living for myself, when will I start doing it?"

Emil nodded. "I get what you mean. So then...you don't want me to walk you back?"

His innocent question made Lili tuck her head into her shoulders like a timid turtle. It was almost cute, he thought.

"I-I wouldn't mind," she nearly whispered, "but it's out of the way, isn't it?"

Emil shrugged. "I don't mind the exercise." He paused for a moment trying to find something else to say. "Did you hear about the day-trip to Chottsym on Saturday?"

Lili looked up again, straightening her posture out. "Chottsym? Isn't it that place between the mountains and coast?"

"Yeah. Leon and I are going together. To clear our minds up and have some fun. Stuff like that."

"Oh." A faint smile appeared. "It must be nice having a friend like Leon."

Emil blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Whenever I see the two of you together, Emil, I get a sense that there's something special between the two of you. I can't put it into words, but it's what I would want in a friendship if I could call someone my best friend."

"A-Ah." He rubbed the back of his neck. Apparently Leon's gesture was starting to grow on him. "It's kind of different. Leon's only my best friend because I didn't have any in high school. He just kind of sat next to me in class one day, and that was it. But I'm not saying whatever we have

together is the best. He can be...overwhelming sometimes."

"Oh, I know that," she giggled. Now it was Emil's turn to flush pink. "But I'm still jealous. I think if I wasn't so shy, I might have had a different experience in high school."

Emil stared for a moment. "Do you regret anything that you should have done in high school, Lili?"

"A little," she admitted. "If I was able to stand up for myself, I wouldn't have had to rely on my brother so much. I might have been able to make friends. I can't blame him for acting that way. He's only been trying to protect me."

"Old habits die hard," Emil grimaced. "My brother's still like that in a way. It's just not as bad because he's over at the grad school. I think if he was here, he'd be stalking us right now." To his amusement, Lili looked over her shoulder to see if anyone was following them. When she returned her gaze to the front without a word, the two of them breathed in comical relief.

"Um, what were you saying about Chottsy again?" she brought back up.

"Oh, that." A weight lifted off his chest when she stopped mentioning friends and brothers. Those were the last things he wanted to be talking about with someone like Lili. "You sign up for it through an online sign-up sheet. There were a few more spots left when I signed up. Do you want to go?"

"Well, it *would* be nice to see some of the surrounding kingdoms...Is it really okay?"

"Of course," he smiled. "Why else would I tell you about it?" He took out his phone. "Here. I'll send you a link. Leon gave it to me."

She pressed her lips together. "Maybe Michelle and Cissy want to go, too."

"Yeah..." Emil was fine with Michelle coming along, but having Cécile going was just as bad as having Charles sitting next to him in the dining commons. Those two were bad chemistry for everyone. But, if Lili really wanted her to go, there was nothing he could do about it.

As his luck would have it, just as Lili receive the link, they reached the bottom of Topaz Hall.

"We're here," he announced. "Did you get the link?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"No problem." Before he left, he stopped and turned around to see her going into the building.

"Lili, if you need help with the lab write-up, you can always E-mail me."

She smiled a little. "Thank you. See you later, Emil."

"Same," he nodded and headed back for Opal Hall.

When Emil returned to his room, he saw Leon sitting at his desk with one of his many pairs of headphones tucked on his head. He didn't bother making eye contact, but he must have seen his roommate coming inside since he greeted him with a short, "Hey."

"Hey, yourself," Emil yawned. He wasn't used to having a class section for so long before. So this was what it was like for Lukas.

Leon took off his headphones once his roommate sat on his chair. "So how was lab?"

"Good," he replied with another yawn. There were tears leaking out of the corners of his eyes. Apparently talking with Lili had distracted him from his lethargy long enough for him to reach his room.

Leon raised an eyebrow. "You look tired, Ice."

He groaned. "It was a long lab, and I was talking with Lili. I had to listen to her about some stuff about her brother."

"Oh. Did you learn his name?"

"Vash," he shortly replied.

"Huh. Suits someone like him."

"Whatever, Leon." Emil leaned back in his chair. There was only one more day of class before the trip. He would have to adjust his sleeping schedule so he wouldn't pass out during the trip. "I'm going to go take a shower." He promptly stood up and went to the closet area to retrieve a change of clothes.

"M'kay." With that, he put his headphones back on his head and returned to his computer. "I'll take one after you."

Emil cursed in his head. *That's right. I still haven't figured out how he keeps his hair like that.* He turned to look back at his friend one last time before going over to the bathroom. *Nah. I'll find out another time.*

# Chapter 15

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Fog still covered the campus grounds when Leon and Emil woke up early on Saturday to prepare for the day trip.

**"We depart at 7 a.m. sharp so don't be late or we'll leave without you!"** the reminder E-mail read in bold letters.

Emil didn't understand how Leon did it; one moment he was staying up into the wee hours research places to go, the next he already finished styling his hair and into a comfortable set of clothes. Where did the energy come from?

"Ice...Ice~"

Emil grumbled. If there was one thing he hated, it was being woken up from his REM sleep. He shouldn't have stayed up to surf. Luckily for him, there wasn't any homework in his classes this weekend.

"Mmmnnng," he groaned. "Leon, get off."

"But, Icey, you need to get up and get ready," his roommate reminded him. "We have to catch the charter bus, remember?"

Shit. The bus.

Taking one last precious moment of rest in his bed, he rolled over to the side and opened his eyes. As expected, Leon had already climbed up on his bunk and was hovering over him.

"Come on, Ice," he chuckled. "You can sleep on the bus."

"It's not the same," Emil yawned, finally sitting up. "If I sit by you, you're going to do something stupid to me."

Leon wore a bemused expression. "Why would I do something like that? Come on. We need to get going."

"Right."

If there was anything that was genuinely hard to do in college, it was getting out of bed. Bunk beds, especially. It was easy enough for Leon to roll right over and slip onto the floor, but it was another thing for Emil to make his way down the ruts in his bare feet. At least that one action got his blood running.

While Emil prepared some supplies for washing up, Leon checked his phone. "We should try leaving in ten minutes," he told his roommate. "The parking lot's all the way down the hill so we're going to need to come to walk there."

"Got it." Then, the sleepy, individual with a bad case of everlasting bedhead went to the bathroom.

Even early in the morning on a weekend like this, there was always someone else wandering around the halls. Students were strange, getting up and going to sleep at crazy hours, Emil thought.

But he digressed. He and Leon were waking up at a strange time, after all. He was sure Lili was doing the same—assuming she signed up for the trip.

After cleaning his face and brushing his hair, Emil returned to the dorm where his friend was still waiting at his desk, feet stamping in eagerness and impatience.

"I wonder who else is going," he said as he watched his roommate dress. "You said you invited Lili, right?"

"Yeah," Emil replied as he threw a shirt over his head.

"Wonder if she's going."

"Who knows?" He tried to sound neutral. Any signs of interest might trigger Leon's pester-mode. He could imagine what horrors might ensue if that got out of hand.

After dressing, Emil and Leon grabbed their book bags filled with money, maps, and jackets and headed out the door. They took the elevator instead of walking down the stairs this time. Leon mentioned they would be doing a lot of walking where they were going.

"Who do you think our chaperone's gonna be?" Leon asked as they exited Opal Hall.

"Don't know," Emil shrugged. "We're going to Chottsym, right? Hopefully it's someone who knows the area and not someone who will ditch us.\*"

"True," his friend smiled.

Eliatha University was structured so that the parking lots were all downhill from the main line of dormitories and away from the classrooms. Other than that, only a few lots were reserved for making deliveries and for the professors, instructors, and staff going in and out of class.

There were already some students chatting around what the two could only assume was a bus stop. Sure enough, there was a lamp post with a sign showing a picture of a bus on it.

"That must be it," Leon commented. "Oh, and look. They've got food."

"Terrific," Emil shivered. It was still summertime, but on an early morning like this when the sun hadn't even risen, the temperatures were less than enjoyable. That being said, since it was so early, the dining commons hadn't opened yet.

Leon didn't bother talking to the managers of the event and went straight for a muffin and a bottle of water. Emil, rolling his eyes, went up to the oldest looking person in the group, a redheaded and rugged man no older than thirty, and asked him if this was the group going to Chottsym.

The man raised an eyebrow. "So you two are freshmeat?"

*He uses that term, too?* Emil thought. "Um, yeah," he nodded. "Do you need some kind of identification?"

Then the redhead pulled out a clipboard and pen. "Just your E-card is fine." He looked past his shoulder. "And your friend?"

"Oh." Emil looked back at Leon. "Leon, get over here. He needs to sign us off."

"Coming." Needless to say, Emil wasn't very happy to see him hauling armfuls of chips and bottles of juice and water. If scolded, he would reply with something shameless like, "Hey, at least it's not

going to waste." Leon could be a real glutton.

When the two of them finished signing their names off, they stopped to eat a quick breakfast at the edge of the road.

"You know you didn't have to get so much food, Leon," Emil frowned. "Sometimes I wish you'd get in trouble."

Leon took a hearty bite of a muffin. "As long as you don't get caught or get in trouble, it's all good."

"All good, my ass," Emil grumbled.

"Mmm." His friend swallowed. "You know who that guy is, right?"

Emil blinked. "Who? You mean the redheaded guy? No."

"He's a Kirkland. Allistor Kirkland."

"Kirkland?" Emil looked over at him again. "You mean *a* Kirkland? As in the same people who go around in that creepy Kirkland Kart that goes around campus?"

"Yeah," Leon chuckled. "They're colorful, aren't they?"

"How do you even know this stuff?"

"I'm Cantonese. It's what I do."

*Worst explanation ever.*

"But they're loaded with money," his Cantonese friend said between sips of juice. "They've got so much that they can get buildings named after them. And even that's a continuous process."

"Hmm."

"I guess he's one of the chaperones. It'd actually be cool if we got him as a guide since he's from Chottsym."

Emil blinked. "I thought the Kirklands were from a different part in Brysogwig."

"They're all over the place," Leon scoffed. "I think the one who mans the Kirkland Kart is born in \_\_\_"

"Morning, everyone!"

All heads turned in the direction of the voice where a criticizing-looking blonde sporting a British bandana and a vest came walking up to the bus station.

Emil noticed Allistor giving the newcomer a smirk. "Look who finally got up," he sneered.

"Pipe up, git," the blonde spat.

"Ooh, speak of the devil," Leon whispered. "That's the one who runs the Kirkland Kart. Arthur Kirkland. He and Allistor are brothers."

*Arthur Kirkland?* Emil echoed in his thoughts. *Why does that name sound familiar?* "They don't

look alike," he noted aloud.

"Nope," Leon agreed. "They're all kind of like that."

Emil was about to leave it at that when he noticed something peculiar about Arthur, something that he shared with a certain Cantonese friend of his. When he came upon the realization, he let out a small laugh.

Leon stared. "What's so funny?"

"Your eyebrows," he snickered. "They're both thick, don't you think?"

After some time, Leon merely said, "No."

"Liar," Emil teased.

"My eyebrows aren't as thick as his."

"Sure about that, Leon? You don't usually take that long to just say 'No' about something like this."

"Shut up," his friend frowned.

*Ah, so this is what it's like to be on the other end of this,* Emil smiled. *No wonder Leon likes doing this so much.*

Just then, Allistor spoke up among the gathering groups of students. "Alright, listen up, everyone! We're going to be assigning you your groups right here so when we get there, you'll know who to pair up with. I have a list of people who are going to be divided into groups. I'm only going to say this once so keep your ears open."

He then began calling off the names of the students and chaperones. As it turned out, Emil didn't hear Lili or her roommates' names being called. Apparently she wasn't able to go on the trip after all. Not only that but he and Leon were on separate teams.

"Ah, I get Bush Brows," Leon groaned. "Didn't want him."

"Ha. I got Allistor." For once, Emil felt as though he was on the better end of the stick.

The teams wouldn't have to group together until they arrived at Chottsym. Until then, Leon and Emil sat together at the front. Of course, Leon insisted on getting the window seat.

"Leon, you sure like to be an ass, you know that?" Emil glowered.

"Want a croissant?" he offered.

He declined.

It would take two hours to get to the destination so until then, Emil decided to catch up on his sleep. From the front, Arthur asked if anyone wanted to watch an English movie. Everyone turned down the offer and chose, instead, to entertain themselves with their electronic devices.

"Pah," Allistor laughed from the front, digging his fingers into his brother's hair. "Don't feel bad about it, Artie. It's not their fault your tastes are shit when it comes to movies."

"Shut it," Arthur grumbled.

Emil's face fell. There was something about Allistor that vaguely reminded him of a certain loud-mouthed Dane. The only differences were their hair, nationality, and more aggressive nature. Perhaps he was thinking too much into it.

*I wonder who he reminds me of?* he sarcastically thought to himself.

"I'm going to take a snooze," Leon announced with a short yawn. "Wake me when we get there."

"Asshat," Emil snorted. "I wanted to take a nap, too."

"Then we'll just both take naps."

"Stupid idiot telling me to wake him," he grumbled before shutting his eyes. He was sure he wouldn't miss anything in the time he slept. Most of the scenery up until Chottsym was just evergreen forest.

And so, accompanied by the soft murmurs of the other passengers, hum of the bus' engine, and the stale, cool air blowing from the front, Emil nodded off within minutes of closing his eyes.

"Everyone up! Come on! We've got a long day!"

Emil woke with a start. Leon, on the other hand, looked as though he had been awake for several minutes now.

"Why didn't you tell me we were here?" he hissed at his friend.

Leon smirked. "Because you looked so cute when you were sleeping. I couldn't disturb such an adorable fa—"

"Idiot!" He shoved Leon off to the side. "I swear to the gods, if it wasn't because I *grrmmble* stupid Leon. I just *ggaahhrrgle rrrhhm*."

"Very mature, Ice."

The scenery had changed upon reaching the other kingdom's borders. Instead of tree-filled hillsides, there were vast open plains with rocks and a nice view of the ocean. Emil knew where they were; they were in Chottsym University, a sister school of Eliatha University and equally as prestigious. The major differences were the locations and students: where Eliatha had quirky students and instructors, Chottsym University had ocean views and a tranquil study environment. The students weren't as interesting, though.

"This is a nice place," Leon whistled as he looked out to the horizon. "I got a scholarship to this place, you know."

Emil rolled his eyes. "So why didn't you want to go here? I thought you like to be different from the rest of your family seeing as how both Cheng and Mei graduated from E.U."

"Wouldn't be as interesting. Plus you wanted to go to Eliatha University." He stopped talking after that.

Again, Allistor spoke above the students. "Everyone in my group come over here," he called out. "The rest of you stuck with your chaperones! If I get reports about you running off doing your own thing, I'll going to make sure you're banned from any other school event until you graduate, got it?!"



The students responded in a chorus of "Yes" and nods.

"Good." He stopped to look at his list again. "Alright, for those of you who are in my group, get over here."

Emil trailed off and away from Leon as he went over to his designated group. As he turned around, he noticed Arthur looking particularly uptight and bloated.

*He looks like he's constipated*, he thought. *Good luck with that, Leon.*

"Let's see...Two, four, six. Good. Everyone's here." The chaperone handed everyone a packet and began to give out a rundown of today's trip. "So the way this works is that we're all supposed to go to different parts of Chottsym and report to the other groups on what we've learned. Our designation is to the fishing wharf. We're going to need to go down to town either through trolley system or walking. What do you fellas want?"

There were a few exchanged looks before everyone agreed on walking. It was then that Emil secretly thanked Leon for letting them take the elevator that morning. The fishing wharf was all the way at the other end of Chottsym. It was going to be one stretch of a trip.

Meanwhile, in Arthur's group, Leon had resorted to texting Mei about the trip. She was already awake, just having finished breakfast.

"I haven't been there in a while," she texted. "Do you think you can check out some of the fabrics while you're there? They have good plaid patterns. Some of them can be used for hoodies."

"Sure," Leon replied.

"You! In the back!"

Leon snapped up from his phone and saw that Bushy Brows was extending a finger in his direction.

"Yeah?" he blinked.

"Did you hear a single word I said?" he huffed. Talk about temper issues. It must've run in the family.

"We're going to the capital district, and we need to stick together. Yadda yadda yadda," Leon threw out. "Oh, and I'm supposed to stick with Romeo\*\* here, yeah?"

He loved seeing that constipated look on Arthur's face. It always made him smile when he pissed people off that way. While it looked like he hadn't been paying attention, he had been listening the entire time.

"Alright, you," Kirkland narrowed his eyes. "I'm going to keep extra attention on you."

"More love for me," Leon shrugged earning another bloated, constipated look from the thick-browed chaperone. *Why do we even need chaperones? We're, like, adults, aren't we?* He wasn't feeling particularly enthusiastic about having to stick with lover-boy the entire trip.

Just to confirm his opinions, he looked over at his partner. There was something about him that just spelt "lover boy" all over. It wasn't just his name, either. Leon might have stuck his finger in his throat if Emil was here. Too bad he wasn't.

"Alright, everyone," Arthur continued as he placed his hands on his hips. "The capital district is a long ways from here so we're going to be taking the trolley."

Leon clicked his tongue. Taking the trolley meant paying a fare. Based on the research he did earlier, Chottsym University should have been a decent two miles away, a practical distance on foot. He could have walked.

"Um, sir," he spoke up, "what if we, like, went there on foot instead?"

Arthur didn't look like he was buying it. "And why would we want to waste precious time? The fare's only two heta."

"Yeah, but, like, I wanted to, like, see some of the surrounding city is all."

None of the students were exactly supporting or going against him. It was really a matter of who would give in first. Arthur or Leon?

"Alright," Kirkland finally said, crossing his arms. "I can be democratic about it. What about this? I'll give you exactly three hours to go wherever you want, but when the clock hits noon and you're not in front of the capital museum, I'm going put you on the student black list for all university activities, understood?"

Leon and the rest nodded.

"Right. Then stick with your partners, and I'll go on ahead. For those of you who want to go straight to the capital district, you can follow me, but you *must* stay with your partners. I'm sure you can work something out. Lastly, if you can't find the capital district, don't worry. All streets eventually lead to Capital Street which runs through the district. In the center is a large dome-shaped building. You can't miss it. And with that, I'll be off. Noon sharp! Don't forget it!"

A few students decided to follow after Arthur to the nearest trolley station while a few others decided to browse the sister Chottsym campus. That left Leon and his partner all alone at the drop-off curb.

"Huh." He turned to face his partner of the day. "So you're Romeo?"

"Right you are, friend!" he beamed.

Leon narrowed his gaze. "Right. Nice to meet you." He shook his hand for good measure. "So, like, are you good walking to the capital district?"

"Whatever floats your boat, Leo," Romeo replied.

"Don't call me that."

"Why?"

"It's stupid. It sounds like a cartoon lion."

Leon's partner stared off into space. "But 'Leon' means 'lion!' I think 'Leo' is shorter and therefore easier to say."

He could feel his blood rising. This guy was already starting to tick him off. "How in Eliatha did you become my partner?"

"I ask myself the same tragic question, Leo," Romeo sighed.

"*Leon*, dipshit."

"I would have loved to instead go with a fair maiden off to the sea." He continued on for another good twenty seconds about his lust for a female partner when he realized Leon had already begun walking down the hill.

"Wait up!" he called after him. "We're supposed to stick together!"

Leon gave him an exasperated look. "Yeah? And I think you'd kiss the ground I walked on if I was a girl."

To that, Romeo actually gave it a bit of thought. Leon rolled his eyes. "Maybe if you were an exceptionally pretty girl, then I wouldn't mind."

"I'm a guy, prick," he spat. "Just don't get lost so I don't have to hear one of those Kirklands run their mouths."

"Ah, it's too bad you're not a girl," he sighed. "You'd really be interesting. Feisty, I might think."

"Ugh...This is going to be a shitty day."

## Chapter End Notes

It's kind of awkward writing Scotland since he might become official, but this story was written almost a year ago.

\*My roommate went with me on a similar trip. Her chaperone ended up ditching her group to go shopping in a completely different district than their intended designation.

\*\*Unofficial name for Seborga. He's one of the micronations.

## Chapter 16

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Traveling around with someone who knew where he was going was a pleasantly reassuring experience. It was like having a tour guide without actually having to rush things or pay to run his mouth. Allistor would just say what he wanted, whenever he wanted.

"...That over there's the Weeping Fountain," he pointed out, noting a sculpture of an angel with her hands covering her eyes. From openings in between her fingers, water trickled out at such a rate that made it appear as though the angel was continuously crying. It was rather depressing.

"Never knew why they built that piece of shit," Allistor sneered. "It's freaking weird."

Everyone in his group could agree.

"So," their chaperone continued, "once we get to the fishing wharf, you're supposed to pick up a thing or two about how the piers contribute to the commercial income here in Chottsym. I'm going to just brief you folks about it, and then I'll let you go, got it?"

Coupled murmurs blurted out some understanding, and the group continued onward.

Along the way, Emil's continuing wish of bringing a camera began to increase. His phone was decent, but in saltwater conditions such as this, he cared more about damaging his camera lens than anything else. It wasn't like they were in the scenic part of Chottsym; rather, they were walking along the main city and the main capital where the city hall was located.

*That's where Leon is going, isn't he?* he thought as he looked over the hills to where the streets converged into one large web of a circle with a towering dome in the center.

It wasn't until way later when the smell of decaying fish remains and sea salt-filled air came around that Emil knew they were nearing the fishing wharf.

*I wonder what Leon would say if he were here, he thought. Probably something like, "Just like home, 'ey, Ice?"*

He shook his head. To hell with Leon. It was nice being able to stay away from him for a while. He could take care of himself. Besides, that meant being able to share some stories and hearing about Leon's—though...he had a strong feeling his friend was going to over-exaggerate his side of the day.

"You guys smell that?" Kirkland asked from the front. Everyone softly nodded. "That's the smell of money—or more specifically, the fish being hauled in. It's actually different right now because of the upwelling being at the opposite side of the country and—Ah, fuck it. You guys don't give a shit, do you?"

"I do..." Emil quietly muttered. He was somewhat familiar to fishing routes in difference parts of the country and around the world.

Where there was cold water, there were different breeds of fish that could be taken up by fisherman on coasts where the water would otherwise be warm. It had to do with the annual ocean currents from below. Cold water from the melting Artic Ocean would travel around the world in

currents, bringing varying temperatures throughout the year. It was a continuous process, and knowing these cycles was important to fisherman. Emil would have to know about these currents, too, in his future career.

"Anyway," Allistor continued, "I'm going to take you guys over to the docks. There's a monument over there that we're supposed to look at, and once you guys know what it is, you can say that I've done my job." And with that, he resumed walking (rather quickly) towards the piers.

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Meanwhile, in the progressing center of the city, Leon was busy mapping out a quick route to the nearest fabric shop on his phone while doing his best to ignore the increasing bantering from his partner.

"Have you ever been to the sunny coastal shores of Italy, my friend?" Romeo asked while flaunting his hips outward in a vogue-like fashion. It vaguely reminded him of a certain Korean computer science major that he had become acquainted with.

To respond to his question, Leon snapped his phone and delivered. "First of all, I'm not your friend, *Romeo*. Second, no, I have *not* been to Italy, and I don't plan on it."

To his annoyance, he felt a bearing weight fall on his shoulder. "Ah, but why not? Italy is the country of sun, the paradise of women, the hub of the festive!"

Leon narrowed his amber eyes. "If you ask me, Spain is the sunny country, France is the loving country, and Brazil is the festive one."

"An arrow to the heart!" Romeo exclaimed, clutching his chest like he had just suffered a high-calorie-induced heart attack.

He rolled his eyes. "More like the knee."

Of course, his partner didn't get the reference. "I need to take you there sometime, Leo. We'll sing, and dance, and flirt like no other pair in Eliatha!"

"Pass," he flatly responded. *Why the fuck would I care? Unless you have the money if you're telling me this so outright.*

"By the way," Romeo stopped, "where are we going?"

"Fabric store."

"*Fabric store?*" he echoed, saying it like he was looking at something gross and dull.

"It's for my cousin," Leon explained. "She wants me to look at some of the patterns over here."

"Ooh." This apparently got the blabbering Italian interested in something other than wooing him over to the lover's side. "So who is this cousin of yours?"

To this, Leon smirked. "She—we look nothing alike. We're distant cousins in blood, but close cousins relation-wise."

"Go on..."

*Good. Dumb bastard is hooked. Bet he's interested in anything with a hole to put something in.*

"So she's got, like, really white hair."

Romeo had to confirm he heard that right. "Um, white hair? You mean like Professor Beilschmidt? The German guy?"

"Prussian," he corrected him. "But, yeah, white hair like snow. And she has, like, purple eyes."

"Hmm. She sounds rather...exotic."

"I'll say," Leon snorted. "She's crazy about designs. Loves fabric. Something of an ice queen, though."

His partner laughed. "There is no woman with a heart of ice that my steamy words cannot melt."

"Whatever, man."

"So...this cousin of yours...is she single?"

He rolled his eyes. "I just told you she's an ice queen. But, yeah. She's single."

"Interesting..." To Leon's mild disgust, he actually appeared interested in this so-called "cousin" of his.

*Ha. I can't wait to see the look on his face when he sees the real thing.* He made sure his phone would be ready when the time came.

It didn't take long before Leon's handy navigation system on his bootleg smartphone led them to his destination. If it weren't for his phone, the two might have missed out on the place altogether. It was so inconspicuous and wedged in between a busy café and a travel goods shop that he nearly walked right past it.

"This is the place your cousin wants you to visit?" Romeo asked as he followed his partner past the flaky, yellow-pained doorway.

"Yup," Leon answered. "I've been in worse during my travels, so this isn't too bad." He could see his partner turning up his nose from his peripheral vision.

"Hmph. I can't imagine what you'd be doing to even go to a place worse than this to begin with."

"You know, you remind me of two asscracks I know back at E.U."

"To compare to such an area of the human body will not do, Leo."

"Make that three." *Yong Soo, Charles, and Dr. Gilbert.*

Trying his best to focus on the task at hand, Leon began snapping pictures of the fabric choices on display. After he would get a decent gallery of photos, he would send them straight to Mei where she would then determine if there were any choice selections to buy. From there, Leon would act like a middleman, telling the store owner how much fabric needed to be shipped over to Mei's studio all the way in Laciport\*.

"See anything that catches your eye?" he dared asking Romeo.

"Hmm, nothing that appeals to much to my tastes, but I'll be the first to admit that nothing in this store is bad."

*That doesn't count for shit, shithead.*

---

On the receiving end of the photos, Mei had taken a break from the studio and had gone out with Cheng to lunch. Considering his promotion required him to travel overseas and kept him fairly busy, it was a nice change of pace to see each other's faces again.

"Have you been talking to Leon recently?" she asked once she helped herself to some tea. She nearly grimaced at the taste; no tea was better than her cousin's special brew.

"He said he's getting adjusted," he smiled. "Though he did tell me he had a fight with Emil a while back."

Mei placed her cheeks in her palms. "Aw, what happened between those two?"

"Leon told me he was being too forceful on Emil, and that angered him."

"We really spoiled him too much as a kid, didn't we?" Mei sighed.

This made Cheng chuckle. "I don't necessarily think you can call it spoiling if the receiver earned the rewards. Leon may appear lazy on the surface, but he still works hard when he needs to."

Mei laughed. "Let's just hope he stays that way." She was about to eat a helping of pan-fried noodles when her cell phone began to vibrate. "Oh, now what?"

"A client?"

She looked at the screen. "No. It's Leon. Oh! And he sent me the photos of the fabrics!"

"Ah, I see," Cheng smiled as he allowed her to conduct her business. He was a man with an eye for business rather than fashion sense. Leave the judging to the experts, he decided.

"Ooh, there are some good ones for my autumn fashion catalogue."

"Chottsym is known for its fine patterns in plaid, are they not?"

"Mm-hmm," Mei nodded. "I was also going for something of a classic uniform high school theme, too—not too traditional, but with enough modern flare that makes it tolerable to wear."

"If anyone can design such outfits, it would be you, Mei."

"Thanks!"

---

"So she wants these?" Leon noted when he scrolled through the replies. "That shouldn't be a problem." He then texted a few farewells to both Mei and Cheng before shutting off his phone and collecting the fabrics.

"There are fabrics of her interest in this place?" Romeo looked up as he saw his traveling partner carry a few yards to the cashier.

"Yeah," he grunted. "Should be a few more..."

"Do you know what sort of outfits she's going to make with this selection?"

"Nosy, aren't we?" he grumbled under his breath. "Just like Bella when she's interested in something. Not as much as this guy, though—and definitely not as obnoxious."

Despite being held back as Romeo began flirting with the assistant manager, Leon managed to place the order on the fabrics for Mei, and began to head straight for the capital.

"Come on, tortellini toots," he snapped. "I'm starving, I want to get to the capital so I can look around. I need to find some interesting stories to tell Ice, too."

"Ice?" the promiscuous Italian shot up, hearing that last part. "Who may that be?"

"Er...the cousin I was telling you about."

"I thought I heard you address a certain 'Ice' on the bus."

*Doesn't forget a "lady's" name, does he?*

"Yeah. That's the very one."

"You mean to say that your cousin is *here*?"

"Sure."

"Well, let us not waste anymore time, Leo—!"

"Leon."

"—we shall go forth to the lands of wonder, where the grass is green, and the skies are grey, and the women are—*Hack! Guh—!*"

"Shut. Up." Leon spoke in a low voice as he tightened his grip around Romeo's neck. "You know that thing about all Asians knowing kung fu?"

"M-Maybe...?"

"Well, it's true," he smirked. "I can break your neck so fast, you won't even feel a thing."

"No...! Please, don't!"

"Psh." With a kick in the shin, he released him onto the street and began walking in the direction of the capital.

"Wait up!"

"Wonder if we're going to see Ice at the capital..." Leon mumbled to himself. "He went in the other direction, but he should be coming here soon. And when that happens..." His hand began to reach for the phone in his pocket. "I'll be ready."

## Chapter End Notes

\* The name of a city in one of my other stories





# Chapter 17

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Emil and his partner had stayed behind while everyone else left to explore the streets of Chottsym. The monument Allistor had led them to was actually a homage to a mysterious line of events that happened in some lost fairytales known as "Dragonfall." Where the origins of Dragonfall came from were commonly unknown to most tourists, though Emil fondly remembers hearing some stories when he was a child.

"It's very intimidating," said his traveling companion, Raivis Galante, a timid and fidgety boy who wasn't even eighteen years old yet. His parents had to sign off on a contract for him to come here, he explained, nearly resulting in him being unable to take this tour to Eliatha University's sister school. "I get the feeling that the dragon is going to come alive or something."

"It's made of stone," Emil logically told him. "It's not going to just spring to life." An appreciator of folklore, he read the plaque's description of the monument to get a better idea of its purpose and construction. Apparently the monument told of an old Crodinian fairytale in which dragons and ancient descendants from all over Eliatha fought to end an everlasting winter. The monument was erected to commemorate the accomplishment of those tales and to better appreciate the changing seasons year round. Emil couldn't complain, being that he preferred milder winters to harsher ones.

After he finished reading, he took a short moment to stop and look at the stone-carved monument. Four dragons were crowded around a single figure clocked in what he could only imagine as fire. The figure in the middle had long since been weathered down by the elements in Chottsym, and he couldn't properly make out whether or not the person was a man or woman. He couldn't even remember what the details of the folktales were anymore, as they were stories his brother long stopped telling him as they grew up.

"We should start looking around," he suggested to his partner. "Are you finished?"

"Me? Yes, I am," Raivis nodded. "So have you been to Chottsym before?"

Emil shook his head. "I'm from the neighboring area, but I never really gave this part much of a chance. But Allistor said we should go check out some of the shops along the docks, right? You want to do that?"

"That sounds like a plan," Raivis smiled and followed him past the water.

It was hard to believe that only a few hours of driving could lead to such a change in the landscape. In comparison to Eliatha, Chottsym heavily harbored its uses as a fishing province. The seas smelled of freshly evaporated fog and foams from the sea. On this fair day, the sea smelled of pining adventure with a little hint of mackerel. Emil and Lukas were long enthusiasts of the oily fish and could recognize the smell when they came across it.

As they were touring the area, they decided to get to know each other some more since they would be spending the rest of the day together.

"So what's your major?" Emil thought to ask seeing as how Raivis wasn't doing too much talking.

"Ah, um, materials sciences," he said almost hesitantly. Emil wondered why that was the case, but he chose to match it up with his character in the end.

"That's a tough major, isn't it?" he commented. "I've heard they only offer classes every so often."

"Yes, but my counselor made sure I'll graduate on time," Raivis weakly smiled. "What about you?"

"Marine biology."

"Oh, that's neat." He paused. "So fish and marine wildlife?"

"Pretty much."

"What kind of research will you do?"

"Whaling and species around northern Europe, I figured," Emil further elaborated. "I want to do something around the place I grew up at."

"Oh? Where'd you come from?"

"I was born in Iceland." It was strange being able to talk so freely without Leon around. Normally the only person to share information with was his friend, and even when he talked with others, Leon had some sort of involvement. He thought this was adequate progress for someone his age. It made him feel a little proud of himself inside. "You know where Iceland is?"

"It's...uh..." Raivis' voice trailed off. "Sorry."

Emil could understand. "That's fine. Not many people know. It's a little ways off of northern Europe between Norway and Greenland." He decided that was enough talking on his part. "What about you? Are you from Eliatha?"

"No, I'm actually from Latvia."

"Oh. So...eastern Europe."

"Mm-hmm. Eliatha feels a little similar to my home. You know, open atmosphere, but everything's so close together."

"Yeah, I can see that," Emil replied. They came across a line of shops all along the docks. Some sold assortments of food while others sell souvenirs. Hidden in the bundle were a handful of services pertaining to the location such as fishing rod rentals, equipment and utility stores, and local bars. In technical abidance to the laws in Eliatha, Emil and Raivis were too young to venture into the liquor stores and bars, but the rules were freer in Chottsym. It surprised Emil, even, when Raivis suggested exploring one of them.

"Are you serious? We're going to get into trouble if Allistor catches us," Emil hissed, looking around as if their chaperone is nearby.

"But the bars and taverns in Chottsym are famous," Raivis said almost disappointed in his partner's lack of enthusiasm.

"Really?"

"Yeah. They all have their special rules and atmospheres. Almost each one is said to have a signature brew."

Emil wrinkled his nose. "And how would that benefit us? We're not even old enough to drink yet."

"But in Latvia, we can drink at sixteen."\*

"Th-That doesn't mean it's okay to drink *here!*" Emil cried just above his normal speaking voice. "I don't know about you, but I'm a citizen of Eliatha, and Chottsym or not, I'm not going to break the laws in my own country."

"Okay. Suit yourself." Raivis easily let the subject go, and the two continued on their way, passing through several bars in the process.

The entire time, Emil wondered how Leon must have been faring. He loosely got a glimpse of who his partner would be, someone who looked familiar to some of the dining commons workers back at the university. Further yet, he wondered if Leon was getting along with his partner; he was never one to enjoy listening to other people's suggestions, and in doing so got his temper up quite a bit if Emil ever saw it.

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"Leo, I'm afraid we must stop."

"You know what? I don't even care anymore." Leon had since given up on trying to correct Romeo's mispronunciation of his name after placing orders on the fabrics. He was hungry and bored. He had initially hoped he would get to spend the day touring the capital streets of Chottsym with Emil; whether taking pictures or trying out the strange foods they had to offer, he would have been just fine with any of it.

Now, he was just stuck waiting for his lousy and Italian of questionable origins tying his shoe.

It was high time they started making a route towards the capital streets. With the walk being a decent trek from the fabric store, there would be just enough time to stop by certain places of interest before meeting up with Arthur. Most of the time, in summary, was spent looking at odd cologne parlors, trying out blood sausages, and almost giving into the urge of stealing an old wooden sign with a worn painting of a dragon on it.

Perhaps it was because his Chinese name roughly meant "dragon," but whatever it was, Leon had a fondness for dragons. While worn, the sign he passed by seemed almost familiar to him in a far-off way. It was only until Romeo told him to make haste that he finally dropped the urge of nabbing the sign, seeing as how it wasn't worth the risk of being removed from the activities list until graduation.

"Honestly, if you've ever found yourself in love, the world would open up so many windows for you, my friend," Romeo gushed in flowery words as if singing a song without a melody. "The mornings come with a blessed greeting, pouring its rays of sun out at you like a butterfly's tender kiss. The air vents in and out through your lungs in a deliverance of precious oxygen and plant-sustaining carbon-dioxide. But alas, the bite of a rose's thorn is sharp amidst its blood-red beauty."

Leon, hoping to stir the flamboyant and overly egocentric man's verbal descriptions into a different direction, started asking him questions. He figured if he provided answers, he would have to think a little about something, just something.

"So what's your major, Romeo?"

"Why, can't you tell? I'm a biochemistry major!"

"A what?" *No*, Leon thought. *This guy—No way.*

The chemistry majors in Eliatha University didn't play around. They were dead serious. Most of the students who didn't want to pursue the passion of promised job security and medicine went into biochemistry, a broad field with several venues ranging anywhere from genetic experimentation to

ecology and collaborations with food companies. Now Leon was wondering which branch Romeo happened to be interested in, seeing as how he never would have guessed he was a student of the School of Natural Sciences.

"So what do you think you're going to do when you're done here?" he asked.

Romeo stopped his mindless romantic bantering and spread his arms out like a majestic white swan batting its wings in mid flight. The spectacle might have been something had Leon not been a guy with a short patience gauge.

"I plan on infusing my love into the most wonderful of memories into the world!" he proclaimed.

"I don't get it," Leon flatly remarked.

Romeo spun around. "My friend, does your closed-minded ignorance know no bounds? Think! To which sensory detail do you remember most fondly out of all of them? Your sight? Your touch? Your voice?"

"Uh...taste," is what Leon went with.

"No!" Romeo exclaimed, startling some of the pedestrians in the area. Leon gritted his teeth and dragged Romeo down the streets towards the capital museum. He was starting to get an idea of how Emil felt when he embarrassed him in public, not that Yao was annoying enough already.

"Dear Leo, the smell! The smell is the most powerful sense in the human body. The olfactory sense of memory bottles up like a precious wish you keep close to your heart. I want to make the best perfumes and colognes in the world, smells that will make you recall memories in an instant! How wonderful would it be if you could bring back the smell of your first date or the first time you lied down on your marriage bed and consummated with the love of your life?"

This was the time for Leon to back up. "Waaay too much information, Romeo. Easy there, man. I'm not looking forward to remembering the smell of anything love-related any time soon."

It was as if someone shot Romeo in the chest with a sawed-off shotgun. His chest suddenly threw itself back with the rest of his body like getting hit with an object at an incredibly high velocity. By the time he recovered, his face had gone pale, and he staggered as if recovering from a near-death experience. The look on his face could only be described as horror-stricken disbelief.

For a split second—just for a split second—Leon was worried. He thought something had happened to Romeo, some weird medical condition or sudden panic attack. What was he supposed to do in this kind of situation if his partner went bat-crazy on him? Was he supposed to call someone? Look for help?

Unsure of what exactly to do, Leon moved cautiously up to his emotionally injured partner and silently examined him. He treaded carefully as if worried that if he used too much volume in his voice, he would destroy Romeo's eardrums.

"Hey..." he softly whispered. "Um, like, Romeo? You okay, there?"

"*Euuguuyahh!*" came a sudden gasp. Leon snapped back just as the life sprang into Romeo's faltering body. His chest swelled again, and he leaned back, appearing to be exuberated from certain doom. "Leon!" he breathed. "Leon, my good friend, you're telling me you've never once thought of the memories you can cherish from love?"

"Who—? What? Wait—*What?*" Now he was confused. Angry, even. The entire act was just

because he was shocked enough by that fact? Who was he to say what Leon felt about such an emotion? And for that matter, why would such a passion be worth pursuing such a difficult major at such a prestigious university? Leon couldn't wrap his head around it. Ludicrous was what it was. He couldn't see how Romeo ever thought it was a good idea, brilliant mind behind his dramatic act or not.

"Leon, the flight of love is boundless, I tell you. Listen here." Without so much as even asking, he wrapped his arm around Leon's shoulder, stubborn with strength and refusing to let go even as Leon attempted to shrug him off. "When you fall, you'll fall hard. Keep your eyes open, and you'll have no idea what will be in store for you. Love is a wonderful emotion. Everyone deserves to experience it from the bottom of their hearts at least once in their life."

Leon sneered. "And what if you fall *out* of it?"

"Then you dig yourself back out and start over," he simply put it. "It can never be the same experience twice, but each moment is an adventure, a leap from the cliff and a different arrow through your heart. By making various scents, I hope that I can at least bottle those memories and love into a vial for people's sake. That is my passion, and I aim to work hard at it. Now do you see?"

"Sure, sure, whatever, Romeo," Leon groaned. "Just...gods, I don't know. Don't do that again, okay? It was weird."

"Weird is not the least of it!" he beamed and patted him on his back.

Leon coughed. "Quit." He cursed under his breath before adding, "Least you got my name right."

Seemingly hearing him, Romeo marched forth with his traveling companion in tow. "Indeed! Now let us march forth towards that wonderful ice queen of a cousin you have! I'll bet she is pining for a thing or two about love, and I'll be just the person to open up her path for her!"

---

Everyone was starting to gather into the gates of the capital museum within the gap of three hours passed. Emil and Raivis were also here, waiting for the rest of the groups to meet up before completing their trip and finishing off with sharing and dinner.

The Kirkland brothers had since summarized their halves of their day, one being more interesting than the other from what Emil could gather.

"And where did you take your little group to, Artie?" Allistor asked. "Let me guess: the embroidery shop?"

"Why do you associate me with the most generalized of my hobbies?" Arthur frowned. "It's annoying and immature, and you're supposed to be the older one."

"That you don't get that I'm joking makes you younger than me still," his brother poked fun at him. He stopped conversing with him to do a quick head count, and he found that there were still three groups missing. "Huh. Twenty minutes in, and some o' them still aren't back yet. They're not my kids. What didja tell yer rascals to do?"

Arthur's nostrils flared, and his cheeks grew bright pink. He must have been embarrassed and for elements he could not control. Emil could empathize with that part of him. "I told them all streets meet here at Capital Street. Meet in three hours with your partners. Those weren't hard instructions to follow, were they?"

Allistor scratched his head. "Shouldn't have been. Then where are the others?"

"Here and healthy!" came a voice from the other side of the crowd. Emil didn't even need to follow the heads of the other students to recognize one of the voices dragging behind.

"Oh. Leon's here."

"That's the one you came here with?" Raivis asked, stretching his neck out for a better view.

"Yeah. I wonder who his partner is." He instantly recognized the odd curl sticking out from Leon's partner's parted bangs as they made their way towards the chaperones to confirm their arrival.

"Huh. Just like the Vargas brothers."

Allistor and Arthur weren't looking too happy. "Yer late," Allistor growled. "Where are the others?"

"Don't know," Leon replied. "We came here on our own."

"Mm, since yer not the last ones here, just make sure you don't do this in more important stuff," Allistor let them off with a warning. His brother, however, didn't look like he was going to let them go right there.

"That's it? You're letting them off with a simple lesson? Don't they deserve some kind of punishment?"

"What do you want me to do? Nag them to death? They didn't do anything reckless, so why should I bother? Plus checking the activities blacklist can be a pain in the arse."

"Augh!" Arthur growled through his teeth. Shortly after, the other teams arrived, and everyone followed the Kirklands into the museum lobby.

Meanwhile, as they progressed, Emil finally reunited with Leon after a long day's worth of touring.

"Hey, Leon. How was your day?"

"Psh. Great. Terrific." He sounded dull and exhausted.

*How unlike his character.*

Out of nowhere, a hand shot out from behind Leon and grabbed ahold of Emil.

"Whoa!" he gasped. "Leon! What the—?"

"Sweet ice queen, so we meet at last." And then, he placed his lips onto the back of Emil's hand. Emil screamed.

"Leon!" he shrieked. Like a spring-loaded trap, he pulled his hand up like a lever shooting up into the air, nearly hitting Raivis behind him.

"Why, my love, what ails you so?" the eccentric and downright creepy man asked. What made it even more disturbing was how genuinely innocent he sounded when asking this, as if kissing another man on the back of his hand was a completely normal thing to do when first meeting someone.

"Wh-What *ails* me is that you just kissed my hand!" Apparently Emil's outburst got the attention of the chaperones because they were going over in their direction to see what the fuss was all about.

"Alright, what's going on here?" Arthur huffed in his bloated temper and appearance. "Are you children getting into a fight?"

"N-No, sir," Raivis stammered. "I think this was all some sort of misunderstanding."

Emil was too embarrassed to say anything to the Kirklands and painfully kept quiet. All the while, he was ferociously wiping his hand on his jeans, hoping the sensation of the kiss would rub off like the saliva that lingered.

"If you've got some problems, I'm right here to sort them out," Allistor offered. "If you've got something to say, now's the time to say it."

Unable to explain what happened, Emil passively muttered that nothing was wrong. Leon, his partner, and Raivis weren't saying anything either, so the Kirklands returned to the front to continue the trip.

Shortly after, Leon shut his phone off and went to comfort his friend. "Ice, you alright?"

Emil's head was suffocating. "Alright? Would you be alright after that? Leon, he—!" He clamped his mouth and looked menacingly at the man who assaulted him. When he returned his look with one of apologetic affection, Emil hid behind Leon. "Who does he think he is?"

"That's Romeo, and from what I've gathered, he's willing to go the extra step to get into someone's pants." The explanation was nothing short of describing a sexual offender, so Emil thought.

In any case, Romeo didn't know his boundaries, or at the very least, he didn't know Emil's. Not too long after reaching the lobby, he came onto Emil again.

"So, my beautiful ice queen, I heard you were a certain acquaintance of Leon's." Every syllable that came spewing out of those seductive-driven lips made Emil's hairs stand on end. He didn't like the vibes coming off of him. They were too intimate for him, and that was saying a lot after being friends with Leon.

"What's it to you?" he snapped, hoping his standoffishness would put Romeo off.

"My darling, did anyone ever tell you how much of a fresh linen snowflake you are among this drab rainy place of a museum?" he crooned. "Everything bows before your beauty, how your white, icy radiance freezes everyone solid, in place! I have never been one to question it, but only now can I say with confidence that there is such an existence. The spontaneity of love! Your frigid allure steals my heart! It will be you to bring me to ruin."

Emil could hardly believe his ears. He was never one to question one's sexuality before, but for someone to express it onto him is an entirely different scenario. This was not like his relationship with Leon. This was real—either that or this Romeo character knew how to act the part of an elaborate love-struck fool. The realization that this person might actually be in love with him frightened him, and it was all he could do to cling onto Leon and whisper frantically in his ear for assistance.

"Leon! Leon, do something!" his voice squeaked a whisper. "He's insane! I think he's actually being serious!"

"About time someone was," Leon joked. By the gods, Emil hoped he was joking.

"This isn't funny, Leon! He's really—!" He pulled down his friend's hand which was holding up his phone. The display wasn't on, but that Leon would think of holding out his phone at a time like this



made him feel dejected. This was supposed to be his friend he's reaching out to, for Eliatha's sakes. He was supposed to support him and drive away this lunatic psycho freak. "Pay attention to me, dammit! Tell him to bug off!"

"Yeah, about that..."

"Leon, why does your cousin not accept me?" Romeo hopelessly asked with sad eyes. "Am I not being approachable enough?"

"Oh, you're doing pretty good at that, I'd say," Leon snickered. Emil just about exploded if it wasn't because they were in the museum. Raivis was a nervous wreck by now, completely confused as to what was going on.

"You said something to him, didn't you!" he whispered as loudly as he dared. "Leon, what in Eliatha did you say to him?"

"Nothing big, really." His friend was sickeningly calm. "Just a little something about how you're an ice queen and my exotic cousin."

Neither of those made sense. "Ice queen?" "Cousin?" None of those things were relevant to Emil. He wasn't a girl, and he wasn't related to Leon in the slightest. He really felt like he was going to explode in front of everyone, and the only thing keeping him together was the prospect that Allistor and Arthur would ban him from activities for the rest of his time in Eliatha University.

Taking a deep breath, he looked in the direction of Leon and Romeo, both of whom were staring at him with unwavering eyes. Leon annoying had his phone out like something big was going to happen, but Emil wasn't going to let the damn guy get anymore satisfaction out of this cruel prank.

He wasn't sure if Romeo knew he was a guy or not and didn't want to question his sexual orientation, so, as politely and maturely as he could muster to someone who had kissed his hand, he went over to Romeo and began to talk.

"Listen, your name's Romeo, right?"

"That it is, my icicle beauty."

Emil's lips twitched. "Yeah, um, listen, I'm not interested in you. The way you just came on to me so strongly doesn't bode well with my nature." He wanted to kill himself. Why was he talking like some archaic robot that just discovered how to speak? What was even worse was that it was like a train wreck as he continued to spill words out of his mouth. "I find it very immature of you to do something like that to someone you've just met. No one would be taken by that. You should learn how to treat people better if you want to win them over."

Unable to continue any further without embarrassing himself, Emil marched to the front of the lines to where the Kirklands were. Raivis nervously followed, leaving Leon and Romeo in the back.

"Ah, that could've gone better," Leon muttered, disappointed. He looked over to his partner whose face had gone blank. "Are you, like, okay?"

Romeo was clutching helplessly to his chest. If Leon didn't know any better, he might have thought he was about to have a heart attack—more so in the literal sense than the figurative after hearing his next lines.

"Could this be...?" he breathed. "Have I at long last achieved the greatest form of human emotion? This feeling that I've long praised and worshipped?"

"Hey—"

"This is it! I have found the one! The one destined to be a part of my life forever!" Leon made a face when he pointed straight towards Emil who was stealing glances back at the pair. "It will be that fortunate soul! This is true love!"

"Hoo boy..." Leon wondered how long this was going to keep up before Romeo either realized Emil was a guy or until he finally gave up his advances. He would be sure to document future attempts when he came across them.

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Emil didn't sit with Leon on the bus ride back, not to chat, not to catch up, not even to look at him. He was pissed. Raivis had since gone off to sleep; he had sensed the tension between the friends and had done well to stay out of their businesses. It seemed that the trip had taken a lot out of his stamina, too.

The bus arrived back at Eliatha University roughly an hour before midnight. The students thanked the chaperones for their time and returned to their cars or the dorms. Emil and Raivis walked together for a time to find out which halls they lived in.

"I live in Topaz Hall," Raivis said, pointing to the second floor. "My room overlooks the square. It's not bad."

"Oh. I live in Opal."

"That's the one that's by everything, right?"

"Pretty much, yeah," Emil confirmed. "It's not as pretty as Topaz, but it's convenient." He yawned. "Sorry. I should get back. I need to sort some things out with my roommate."

"Leon, you mean?"

"Yeah." As Emil went to leave, he looked back one final time, wondering if he should practice what Leon preached. "Hey, since you're in materials sciences, maybe I'll catch you in one of my chemistry classes sometime?"

Raivis smiled. "Maybe. That'd be nice. Then I'll catch you later, Emil. It was nice meeting you today."

"Same," he returned and bid him goodnight. As he walked back to Opal Hall, the aches on his feet became apparent, and his stomach started to growl. He wished he had ate more back at the museum restaurant, seeing as how the dining commons didn't have any main courses to offer at this hour.

Holding his stomach, he eventually made his way back to his dormitory where Leon was waiting.

"Hey, Ice," he greeted. "How was your trip?"

Emil thought about giving him the silent treatment, but that wasn't an effective form of communication. Nothing would get anywhere without telling him anything, so he ignored his friend's question and brought up the issue at the museum.

"Why did you tell Romeo I was a girl?"

Leon smirked. "You're still mad about that?" He absent-mindedly scratched his cheek. "But I guess it will be a problem from now on, so I can't say for certain it'll go away..."

"What?"

"He sort of...I dunno, Ice. I think he's in love with you."

Emil blinked. He didn't know what to feel at this point. The entire exchange of emotions was just too awkward for him to process.

"To tell you the truth, Ice, I thought he'd drop the act when he found out you were a guy."

Now he was more confused than ever. "You're saying he knows I'm a guy?"

"Well, I don't know if he heard me. He looked like he was off in his own little world." Leon let out a noisy yawn before stretching his arms. "But whatever. That stuff dies out sooner or later. As long as you don't run into him, it shouldn't be a problem."

Emil wanted to know at least the few basics. Seeing as how Leon was a business management major meant that he at least covered the base questions when getting to know a student. "So what year is he?"

"Freshmeat like us."

Of course, Emil thought. "And what major?"

Leon almost pulled a laugh when he told him. "Biochemistry. Can you believe it?"

"*Biochemistry*?" Emil repeated. "But that's one of the toughest majors—What is a guy like him doing in a major like that?"

"Beats me."

"How did he even get into this school?"

"You can ask that question to a lot of the people here, Ice."

Emil was completely baffled. He wondered if Romeo was one of those oddly rare people who were able to balance their wild social lives with that of their academics. If that was the case, he wondered how his studying habits went.

He shook his head. He was thinking like a twisted version of Lukas and Leon put together, and the last thing he wanted was to be a fusion of the two.

"If it helps, Ice, he's a Vargas."

"Huh?"

"Romeo Vargas. He's, like, a grandson of Augustus Vargas."

"The dean? Seriously?" Emil pieced two and two together. "So maybe that's how he was able to get in here and in that major. I can't believe the school would let him get away with that."

Leon shrugged. "But his cousins don't seem better off. They're just working at the D.C. even when they have the same connections."

"O-Oh..." Emil did think that Romeo bore an odd resemblance to two brothers who worked at the dining commons. It never really occurred to him that there might have been more than two Vargas relatives being at the same campus. It made him wonder just how small of a world he truly lived in

was.

At this our after the long day, Leon got up to take a shower before bed. Emil decided to linger and message his brother now that he couldn't bother him about the trip and safety issues. He left the part about Romeo being an issue out. Chances were, if Lukas ever caught wind that Romeo was harassing him, he was afraid someone was going to get evicted from medical school.

"Leon, you ass," Emil sighed, wondering how he was going to cope. In times like these, he thought about what sort of justice would make him satisfied. As Cheng would tell him, success is the best revenge, but it was a matter of perspective; Leon knew how to twist things to his favor. That wouldn't work. What then, he thought, would be the best course of action?

Emil mentally planned some ideas before pushing the thoughts of pranking Leon away. That would be childish. He was old enough to know how to make rational decisions. Soon, he thought. There would be plenty of times to get back at Leon for tricking Romeo. They lived together, and when two people lived in the same room, there were plenty of times to exact revenge.

## Chapter End Notes

\*The drinking age in Latvia has since increased to 18, but in the context of this story, I'm assuming Latvia has already had his first taste of alcohol.

Seborga most likely doesn't act like this in real life, I'd imagine. He's probably straight, but for comedy's sake and various unexpected factors, I'll depict him like this for one chapter.

## Chapter 18

Unlike before when it was a place where only a few students would hang out to eat lunch or take a nap, the library soon became a place for colleagues to congregate and "study" with one another over soft music and textbook reading clubs. In other words, midterms were already underway.

Emil had been taught about how to handle midterms several times by his brother before even setting foot into Eliatha University. Always start early. Come the day of the test, if he doesn't know something, chances are, he won't know it any later.

So went the ideal way of studying, but seldom ever did anyone take to those words of advice, and Leon was looking like one of those individuals.

It was one Wednesday afternoon after Emil had finished his classes when he came across his roommate loafing in his bed and playing what sounded like another MMORPG. Emil knew this because he had gotten used to the rhythm of the mouse clicks Leon used for specific games, and it was obvious that studying didn't require that many clicks per second—unless bullet mania mayhem was a course offered in Eliatha University, but Emil was pretty confident that it wasn't a thing.

"Aren't you going to do some studying?" he asked as he threw his bag down at his desk.

"Don't worry, Ice. I've got this," Leon slurred. His eyes were glued to his screen. Whatever was going on in his game could wait. His character couldn't die in real life, but Leon's grades could affect how the rest of his career played out. It was common knowledge.

"Leon, your dad's going to get pissed at you." Just for emphasis' sake, Emil was sure to address his friend's guardian as his dad. He knew how much Leon disliked hearing that term around him.

"Just until this match is over, Ice. I'm almost done."

Emil rolled his eyes. "That's what you always say. I thought you would at least listen to Cheng and get your stuff done ahead of time." He sighed and rummaged through his drawers. "Whatever. I'm going to head to the library to study with Michelle."

"M'kay," his roommate shortly replied and left him on that note.

Not too long after that, Emil left the room and headed in the direction of Sapphire Hall. A little past the study-focused dormitories was the Beilschmidt Library, constructed in the name of Eliatha University's current dean alongside Augustus. Many donations were given to erect the modern-looking building, and because it was closer to the dormitories and generally newer than the first library, more students found themselves gathering at this location to work on their studies.

Michelle was waiting on the third floor for Emil with a studying room reserved for the two of them. Lili was supposed to join them, but she apparently had "other things" to attend to.

"I bet Vash just held her up or something," he thought aloud as they opened up their books to the tested chapters.

"Oh, I'm sure she has other classes she needs to worry about, too," Michelle said, ever the optimist. "Besides, this way, it'll be easier to focus. My grandpa told me sometimes too many cooks in the kitchen can lead to a mess of things."

Emil chuckled. "Sure. We'll go with that. I just feel bad since we were supposed to do this together.

I don't think one more person would've hurt." He shifted topics. "Anyway, we need to make sure we know the components of the cell and membrane. I remember my brother saying something about how the professor tests you on the celluloid properties. And that's just the first part of it. Earth history is also going to show up."

"Yeah, huh." Michelle flipped to the earlier sections of her book. "I was reviewing some of the slides, and it doesn't look too bad. We can quiz each other on the topics he handed out, if you want to do that."

"That sounds good," Emil agreed. "And if there's something we're stuck on, you can always ask Lili." He wrinkled his nose. "Or in any case, I can always ask my brother. He'll probably remember."

Michelle was smiling unusually brightly. "Your brother really sounds reliable, Emil."

"Sometimes too much," he begrudgingly admitted.

For the next hour and a half, they went back and forth between notes and problems in the book and lecture slides. For better or for worse, the midterms in biology were multiple-choice based, meaning it could have been to the test-takers' advantage if they knew how to test or knew the material. As they went over some problems in their homework, Emil's mind wandered off to Leon and his current status.

"Wonder what he's doing right now..." he mumbled aloud.

"Leon?" Michelle accurately guessed.

"Yeah. He's just goofing off in his room." Emil clicked his tongue. "Stupid business management major."

"Oh, don't say that. He worked hard to get here, too, you know."

"I guess, but he has all these people who want him to do well, and what does he do? Goes off and plays video games all day. Sometimes the night, too."

Michelle raised an eyebrow. "Then how does he manage to keep up?"

Emil scratched his head. "I think it might have something to do with the way his brain works. Cheng once told me he actually works better when he gets other things out of the way. You know, it really doesn't look like it, but he doesn't have problems in his classes. I just wish he would be more serious about school."

"Mm, that's true. But it *is* college. You should let loose sometimes, too, Emil."

He dryly laughed. "Yeah, and wind up knocked out in some bathroom with a permanent marker drawing of profanity slapped on my cheek."

Apparently the example was too specific because Michelle was giving him a blank stare.

"Oh, uh, i-it's something that happened to my brother's friend when they were undergrads," he quickly explained. "Mathias, the law student?"

"Uh-huh."

"Yeah, he went drinking with some friends, and they ended up leaving him in some bathroom."

They took some pictures and gave them to him. Lukas saw the pictures, and he was *not* happy."

"Oh...I can only imagine."

Emil smirked. "I think it's best to leave those things to the imagination anyway." He gathered himself together. "Anyway, I think that's good enough for today. Do you want to stop now, Michelle?"

"Yeah, that's good," she agreed. "I think we'll be set for the midterm. Are you feeling confident?"

"Enough so." He didn't want to sound too overly confident in case it made her feel any less sure of herself. Whatever the case, he had a feeling they would both be in good shape for the exam. "Um, do you want to get something at Hatches? I'm kind of in the mood for something sweet."

"That'd be nice," Michelle beamed. "Maybe I can pick something up for Lili and Cissy while we're there. Oh, maybe they'll have the coconut macaroons this time! Did you know we have a special coconut back at Seychelles, Emil?"

"Uh, no." Out of courtesy's sake, he asked, "What sort of coconut is it?"

"I think here, you can call it a *coco de mer*, a coconut of the sea. It looks like a butt!"

Emil flinched at how directly she just said the last word, especially since they were now walking down the aisles of the library towards the stairs. Of all things for her to describe it as and of all places, he uncomfortably thought. But for Michelle's sake, he went along with it.

"So you're saying it has a..." He struggled for a proper description. "...groove in the middle?"

She nodded. "They can get *reaaaally* huge! I think it would almost be as heavy as a cannonball, now that I think about it."

Emil forced a smile as he gathered the last of his things and walked with Michelle outside. "I'm not too sure how heavy that is, but I take that it's really big. So can you eat them?"

"Yeah, you can! We can even use them as decorations or bowls! They make for good souvenirs, though nowadays, the trees in our area are protected because of habitat issues."

"Oh."

"But it's not too bad. Not many places can grow them. Seychelles is known for them."

Emil chuckled. "That's nice. People forget about my birthplace a lot."

Michelle batted her eyelashes. "I don't think I've even heard of Iceland before you mentioned that place to me."

"Th-That's okay." Emil didn't have the heart to tell her he hadn't even known of Seychelles until Leon brought it up to him, that smart-ass.

"Does anything special grow over there?" she asked.

"Er, not...maybe nothing I can think of that's too indigenous. Even our people are supposedly from Norway." He sighed and searched for something interesting. Truth be told, there were a lot of interesting places to see, but he couldn't exactly pinpoint on unique species at the top of his head. It wasn't until they reached the vine-covered arches leading to Hatches and saw some moss growing in the crannies of the cobblestone that he remembered.

"Oh, I just thought of something," he said out of the blue. Michelle looked quizzically at him since he had been silent the entire walk there. Embarrassed, he gritted his teeth and tried to smile. "You were asking me about something that grows in Iceland. Yeah, there are these little green fuzzy balls that we used to have in the lakes around. They're supposedly in other places in the world, but where we live, we called them..." Even he had to dig up the word in his memories. "*Kúluskítur*, is what they're called."

Michelle didn't even try pronouncing it.

Emil chuckled. "It means, er, 'poop ball.'"

"Oh!" Michelle cried more in amusement than disgust, thankfully.

"It's because when they would wash up on the shore, they looked sort of like the animal...leavings that you would sometimes see on the ground. They're actually balls of algae. Leon told me they make good pets in Japan even though they're just plants."

"That sounds cute!"

Emil couldn't understand her tastes, but he wasn't her.

In any case, they made it to Hatches in due time. At this hour, they didn't expect there to be any dragon puffs left, but what was left over would still be equally if not more delicious. There were several breads displayed here and there on the shelves, neatly stacked and still warm from the afternoon baking rush. Inside, a large crowd of people ranging from undergraduates, graduate students, and a few professors sat or stood, chitchatting or browsing the bakery's selection of drinks and pastries.

One particular man who stood out to Emil was a tall-looking fellow with a long violet-and-white-striped scarf. He looked to be the gruff and silent type with his piercing eyes and unmoving scowl as if there was something gross about the place. His blonde hair was curiously combed in a straight-ward fashion that would have looked comical had he not been so tall. He was talking to Bella who happened to be working the cash register today.

"...An' keep an eye on the idiot, would you?" Emil heard him tell her. "Damn guy should be earning every heta we're paying him."

Bella laughed. "It's not you who's paying him, and Toni's a nice guy, Tim." She finished fixing up a warm drink for him and placed the lid on the cup when she spotted Emil above the rest. "Oh! Hi, Emil!"

Emil flinched, shocked that she would still remember his name. "A-Ah...Hi, Bella," he nervously waved.

The tall person who Emil overheard was "Tim" looked down at the two freshmen with a hard glaze. "Who're these squirts?" He sounded like the condescending type.

Fortunately Bella seemed to notice how uneasy they were becoming. "Tim, knock it off! You're scaring them!" She gestured over him. "Emil and...."

"Er, Michelle?" Michelle questionably responded.

"Michelle! This is my older brother, Tim. He's an economics professor here. Maybe you've seen him around?"



Emil pressed his lips together. "Then you must be my roommate's professor. He's taking your second general economics class."

The hard-eyed professor took a sip from his cup. His expression seemed to have relaxed after getting something in his stomach. "Mm, if he's in that class, I wouldn't know him unless he came to office hours. What major?"

"Business management?"

"Oh. Yeah, lots of those in there, too."

Emil almost felt inclined to shrug. He couldn't help what was fact.

"So what about you, kid?" Tim asked. "Bella knows you, so you must be pretty important."

"Ah...well..." Emil's voice trailed off.

Bella let out a trilling laugh. "Tim, don't tease him! Look at how scared they are!"

"Then maybe you shouldn't have called us over," Emil mumbled under his breath just enough so no one could hear him. In a speaking volume, he said, "That's alright. I just sort of knew her because she remembered my brother. I-In any case, we were just here to get something to snack on and we'll be on our way."

With his cup in hand, Tim made a small nod his sister's way and shortly acknowledge the two "kids."

"You kids study hard and don't shit around, you hear?"

"Yes, sir," Emil and Michelle automatically replied.

He took a drink. "And if you see this annoying-ass cocoa-headed worker here, give him a kick. Chances are, if you see him, he's probably working at a snail's pace."

"Ah—"

"Tim!" Bella cried.

Her brother shrugged. "It's true. Later." And like as passing wind, he drifted out like an invisible entity, not leaving a trace or bumping into anyone in the stuffy bakery along the way.

"Oh, that guy..." Bella sighed when he left. "I'm sorry, you two. I know he acts all cold and scary, but he's really a nice guy when you get to know him."

"I'm sure that's the case," Emil responded. He wanted to be sarcastic, but he knew people who were bigger assholes the more one got to know them.

She dismissed the thought with a wave of her hand and straightened her apron. "I won't keep you two any longer. If you're here to get something, you must be hungry. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"That's alright," Michelle smiled. "It was nice meeting your brother and a professor." She wistfully looked out of the door as if expecting to see him standing there with a light shining behind his back. "So that's what they're like outside of their classrooms..."

Both Bella and Emil shook their heads.

"Not all of them are like that," Bella giggled. "There are those who are either nicer or meaner. My brother's a little special in that he can go both ways depending on what side of him you get on. Hopefully his good side."

"Oh."

"Well, I'll just leave you to look around." She moved back from them to attend some customers who are waiting to be charged. "Take your time!"

"Thanks," Emil and Michelle said and went their way. As they were looking, Emil thought to text Leon to see if he wanted anything when he remembered Leon didn't even pay him back for the meal swipe he owed him.

"Damn guy," he muttered.

"What?" Apparently Michelle heard that.

"Uh, it's nothing you need to worry about. I was just thinking maybe Leon doesn't deserve my attention."

His friend tilted her head. "Aw, don't think that way. Leon's a great guy."

He wrinkled his nose. "Not really, now that I think about it. I just attract weird people." He quickly added, "Not that you and Lili are weird or anything."

That made her laugh. "Thanks, Emil. But if nobody was weird, then nobody would be unique, right?"

"Uh, I guess? I never look at things that way." Perhaps he should, he thought.

"You should try it!" she beamed. "It's better for your health, and you feel a lot better! That's what my grandpa always told me!"

Emil smiled. "Your grandpa sounds like a nice person."

"Yep!"

By the end of their shopping expedition, they wound up getting two loaves of milk bread, a bag of coconut macarons and cream-filled buns for the girls, and a bundle of barbecue pork buns for Leon, his favorite.

"Ah, I'm really going to regret this," Emil groaned as he leafed through his receipt.

Michelle was thinking otherwise. "If you see him being happy, then you'll be happy, too, Emil! Come on, Leon's your friend! You need to have a good time with him. Why would you stay being his friend, otherwise?"

"I don't know. He was sort of that default guy that came into my life all of a sudden." He gingerly took one of the buns out his box and started to nibble at the rounded edge. There was a thin layer of sweet glaze on the surface, making it glisten and taste sweet. As they walked, he carried on the conversation. "Leon's a weird case. I can't really compare him to any other friends because, well, before he came along, I really didn't have any."

"Oh..."

"Yeah, well, that's in the past. But, like, he annoyed me at first. A *lot*. I wasn't used to having

someone else thrown into my life. But I guess, when I boiled it down, he was still sticking with me. Something made him stay. I don't know what that reason is, but he could have easily chosen someone else. Maybe someone smarter or richer or good at gaming or business. Just someone who wasn't me." He rolled a piece of soggy bread in his mouth. "I'm honestly surprised is all."

There was a long pause as they walked back to their dormitories when Michelle burst something out around Sapphire Hall.

"Maybe he likes you!"

The assumption came out so directly that Emil nearly choked on his bread. "Ack! Ah-*hack!* Oh, gods!"

"E-Emil?"

"No, I'm alright—!" he gagged. He held a hand up to keep her at a distance in case he expelled something. Clutching his chest, he bent over and began to violently cough until whatever was lodged in his throat finally went down the right way. "Oh, gods! Oh my go—*hugh!* Ugh....Uh—I'm okay. I'm okay..."

Michelle looked genuinely worried. "Emil, I'm really sorry. If it was because of what I said—"

"No, that's okay!" he burst out to clear his lungs. "I just wasn't expecting it was all." He took a moment to settle down. His throat, ears, and eyes were burning. It was like he had swallowed something spicy, and it wasn't letting up in his throat. Even long after he caught his breath, his heart was still pounding. "Ah..." He sniffed. "What was I going to say...? Oh. Yeah, about Leon. We're not a thing. At least, not as far as we or anyone is concerned. It wouldn't make sense, would it?"

Seeing that things were back to normal, Michelle also reverted back to her usual self. As she pondered his question, she tilted her head and averted her eyes in thought. "Mm, I just thought maybe since he really seems to care about you but not in the friend sense, he would think of you differently in a likable sense?"

Emil's face fell. He had been subjected to having people believe he and Leon were a couple in the past. For a friend to now consider this was giving him an uneasy feeling in his stomach, and it wasn't coming from the bread.

"There's no reason for Leon to like me, and I don't see him that way. We just are what we are, Michelle. There's really nothing more to it than that."

Thankfully for him, she was the type to easily let things go whichever way, and she accepted his explanation. "Okay. If that's it, then I'm really jealous. That's something most people don't really have between two friends."

"Really?" He felt confused. Lili had mentioned something along those lines, too. What was it that he couldn't see but these two could?

Whatever it was, it would have to wait. They were in front of Topaz Hall now, and Michelle needed to study for her other classes.

"See you in culinary, Emil!" she smiled.

"You, too," he responded and left with a wave.

The walk back to Opal Hall didn't take as long as it normally did, Emil felt. It was a shame since he was hoping to get more time to think of what to say when he came across Leon.

"Here, I bought too many and had some leftovers."

"They had a bunch, so I didn't want to waste them."

"Eat them before they get cold, loser."

"Oh, I was just over at Hatches, and I was thinking of you..."

"...*thinking of you*..."

"Gah! No!" he cried aloud, horrified that he even thought of that last one. Luckily for him, no one was outside. He was panting before he even reached the stairwell. Not wanting to exhaust himself, he chose to take the elevator this time. To hell with Leon and his stupid exercise routines. Emil walked enough to get his day's worth of exercise. He didn't need to listen to him.

"Stupid Leon," he hissed in the elevator and kicked the back of the wall with his heel. The box he was carrying made a soft clunking noise as he rebalanced himself and leaned against the back.

"Ha...I'll bet he's off goofing around and clickety clacking."

As he made it to the top floor, a small electronic *ding* chimed in the hallway. With his bag and box in tow, he fumbled for his E-card before managing to get it into the slot. When he opened the door, he expected to see Leon flopped on his bed and playing his clicky game, but to his surprise, he was sitting at his desk with two books open and a webpage that clearly showed multiple-choice problems.

"I-Ice!" Leon cried out as if in surprise. Emil caught him jumping ever so slightly in his seat and removing his headphones. "I didn't hear you coming!"

Emil raised an eyebrow. It took him a short while before remembering how using the stairs caused echoes throughout the hallways, something the architects didn't keep in mind when constructing the place.

*Is that why he always told me to use the stairs?* He wondered. *So he could hear me coming?* He was supposed to be mad about that, but he was still more surprised by the fact that Leon was actually *studying*.

"Er..." For good measure, he still thought to ask his roommate. "So what are you doing?"

"This?" Leon chuckled. "Oh, just looking at some review problems and things. Nothing much."

Emil furrowed his eyebrows. "Why are you worried about me catching you studying?"

"I'm not," he insisted.

"Liar. I saw you. You freaked out when I came in."

Leon held up his hands as if a criminal caught by a cop. "Alright, alright, I'll admit it. The great Leon Wang actually studies. How about that?"

"So?"

"So? It just doesn't fit my character! I'm supposed to be the guy who looks like I do nothing all day and pulls straight As out of his head to piss people off!"

Emil wanted to be mad, but seeing Leon's true character coming out was like catching him in a place he wasn't supposed to be in. This knowledge could be empowering to the right people, but for now, he simply thought it was amusing that Leon thought of himself so highly like this.

"You're an asshole, Leon. Here." He shoved the box from Hatches in his friend's face, to which Leon fell back in his chair.

"What's this?"

"Those barbecue pork buns I always see you buying," he grumbled an answer. "I-I saw a bunch while walking back from Hatches. I know how much you like them, so I bought some for you."

"Oh." There was an awkward moment of silence before he finally took them. "Thanks, Ice. Glad to know even when I'm an asshole, you still think about me."

Emil scoffed. "I hate you, Leon."

He laughed. "Love you, too, Ice."

## Chapter 19

It was here. Midterms. Biology was first. It was always first. Lukas often talked about how the courses involved several midterms to "weed out the weak." Most of the biology students were trying to get into medical school, after all, and only the best of the best could get into a top program. Emil would have said his brother was in over his head, but he must've done something right; he *was* in Eliatha University's medical school program.

Emil had two midterms in one week: biology and chemistry. He managed to study plenty of biology with Michelle in the days prior to walking to the lecture hall. As for chemistry, Lili wasn't there to help him, so he ended up studying by the book.

"You're not going to office hours?" Leon had asked him once. "I figured you an' your brother would be those types to make sure you knew everything." Emil had then shaken his head at his roommate and had told him Lukas never really needed to go to office hours unless it was to discuss a problem he missed. Other than the rare visit to the department buildings, he never needed clarification. Sometimes Emil wondered if it was worth it to sacrifice friends for better grades. Lukas didn't have to deal with computer games under his bunk or loud Cantonese cursing at odd hours, after all.

Speaking of odd hours, Leon never seemed to be on par with Emil's sleeping schedule anymore. Ever since discovering that he studied just like any model student did, Leon's patterns became as unpredictable and easygoing as a cat's. Sometimes he would take a long nap, play a computer game or two, surf on the web for a couple of hours, or get lost in conversations with either Mei or Cheng. With Yao, it always ended up in a fight. Emil was sure to leave the room whenever those phone calls came.

"He just loafs around all day. I don't know what he's thinking, wasting his life and money like that," Emil huffed to Michelle and Lili as they walked to biology together. There were more students than normal, some walking straight ahead with blank expressions, some glancing at handwritten notes, and others quizzing each other on biology facts. All of these people must have been headed for the hall, too, Emil speculated. He also noticed a heavier flow of traffic just like Lukas said. There were always bound to be people who would only show up for tests and turn in their homework. There were miracle workers who could never show up to lectures and still pull high marks in all of their classes. Then again, this *was* Eliatha University. Anything could happen.

"Do you think maybe he's shy about you walking in on him?" Michelle guessed. "From the sound of things, he hasn't pulled something like this before."

"Maybe? I don't know." Emil sighed. "I'm just worried because you mentioned Cécile having an economics midterm, and I know Leon's in the same class as her. I get that he doesn't want me around when he's studying, but he has to do it somehow, right? His family is really counting on him doing well in school, especially since he worked his butt off to get a scholarship—well, okay, maybe that's out of the question, but it doesn't seem fair that he's just wasting his life."

"I can't imagine..." Lili quietly commented. Most of her attention was focused on her notes. Michelle had to occasionally scoot her away from an oncoming sidewalk lamp or person when she wasn't looking straight ahead.

"That's alright. You don't need to imagine. This isn't really my problem, but maybe it's because I'm his friend." Emil sighed again. "Never mind. Anyway, do you two think you're ready for your first midterm?"

"I think so," Michelle replied. "We studied a lot."

"Maybe?" Lili answered less confidently. She was still looking at her notes. "There's so much to remember..."

Emil attempted to offer her some reassuring words, but she didn't look like she was paying any attention to anything but her notes. For the rest of the way, the friends walked in silence as they approached the lecture hall and went inside.

For tests, all book bags and notebooks had to go on the sides. Most upperclassmen recommended bringing as little baggage as possible, but there were some people who had to stay on-campus for more than one class; these people were instructed to set their baggage aside and take their scantrons and pencils to their seats.

And then there were the clipboards. They weren't the average-sized clipboards build for holding simple sheets; these were large clipboards that could hold someone's entire lunch and still have room for a little laptop. Because of the location of the biology lecture in the auditorium, there were no built-in desks in these chairs. Emil normally found his notebook to be thick enough to hold its own weight as he jotted notes down, but today was a testing day. He had to bear with using a large clipboard.

"Bags on the sides, sit one seat away from each other except the front!" The professor was yelling with his voice from the front of the stage. There were teaching assistants wandering the aisles to guide the wide-eyed freshman to an unoccupied seat. Nervous murmurs, unzipping backpacks, and clattering clipboards echoed throughout the lecture hall to create what would one day be a familiar sound in the days to come. Even with biology out of the way, there was still chemistry to worry about. Luckily for Emil and Michelle, there were no written tests in culinary class.

"Don't start until I say go," the professor announced. The teaching assistants were handing out packets of tests out on the sides of the rows. Each student took one packet and passed the stack onto the next person. It was similar to high school save for the larger amount of people and not nearly knowing everyone's name. Finally after the teaching assistants returned to the front, the professor put up a larger clock on the screen and shouted, "Okay, you may begin!"

A symphony of shuffling papers, creaking seats, and pencils furiously scribbling names and crossing out wrong answers commenced at the very beginning. Emil kept his eyes solely on his test, though he could not drown out the crinkling paper and occasional cough. Geared to take the test as he did his entrance exams, he skimmed the test to look for the fastest questions to answer and filled these in first. From there, he returned to the beginning to work through the rest of the test. This procedure went on for the next hour with the professor counting down from the half hour mark, to the fifteen-minute mark, then to the ten minute countdown, five, one, thirty seconds...

"Okay! Time's up! Fill in your last question and pass them up!"

Students were not allowed to handle each other's tests, so as a result, whomever was left over from the last minutes had to scramble to the front to turn in their tests to their teaching assistants. The clipboards made it difficult to easily maneuver around some people, and Emil wished he had attempted to finish early instead of checking his answers multiple times. This was a mess.

"No talking about the test! Keep quiet until after you leave the building!" the professor reminded the students. "Come on! Keep it moving! We've got another class coming in!"

Emil turned his test in and was quickly out the door upon retrieving his book bag. Behind him, Michelle followed out, asking how he thought he had done.

"Not bad, I guess," he told her, trying not to sound too confident or modest. "I had some trouble with one of the questions regarding the order of the earth formation."

"Which one was that again?" Michelle asked mostly to herself rather than to her friend. "I kind of forget what happens after the test. It just makes me worry too much, you know."

He shrugged. "I suppose. It was the one about the snowball effect. I wasn't sure about the time period..." Then, he looked over to the lecture hall to see if any of the students coming out was Lili. "Did you see Lili finish? She was next to you."

"No, I didn't. I thought she was right behind me."

Curious as to where Lili went, Emil and Michelle pushed back through the clumps of exiting and entering students, calling out Lili's name—well, that was, Michelle mostly did the calling; she was louder than Emil by far, so Emil was left to do the searching. He was looking for any signs of her familiar short blonde hair or even the lilac ribbon she wore; however, it didn't look like he needed to look out for either of things because, by coincidence, he happened to bump right into her.

"Oof! Sorry—Oh. Lili!"

"A-Ah...I'm sorry, Emil," she softly apologized, getting bumped and pushed by the influx of students pouring into the lecture hall. Emil would have said something, but he felt it was better to get her out of this place before they got squished. Taking her hand, he dragged her out of the crowd until they came to the opening on the grass line. Michelle found them moments later.

"Good job, Emil! You found her! Lili, how did you think you did?"

Her answer was given before she even had to verbally address it. Judging from her worried expression and fidgeting hands, Michelle and Emil could tell she didn't do so well.

"I-I tried my best..." she trembled. Emil couldn't stand looking at her being so helpless. She looked like she was going to burst into tears. "I didn't finish. I failed..."

Emil and Michelle looked at one another with a sympathetic look in their eyes. It was as though both of them were trying to tell the other to comfort her first. Emil eventually decided he would say something when a voice from behind shot out and sent a piercing icicle shooting down his spine.

"What's going on here?" Gods be damned, it was Vash.

Thankfully, Michelle who noticed him and the mood spoke first. "Oh? Vash, erm, we just got done with a midterm, and well..."

Lili's stone-cold eyed brother had his attention focused on his sister whose face was a bright pink. Emil thought he was going to hit him, but he dared not run away if it meant showing his support for Lili or saving his skin. Then, in an unexpected turn of events, he placed a hand on his sister's head and started to tousle her hair as only an older sibling would do.

"Come on, Lili, cheer up. There are four more midterms and ten more weeks of school. You'll do better. You learn and you keep going. It's not the end of the world if you didn't do well on one little test."

His little sister hiccupped. "But...it was basic biology..."

"Psh. Basic biology my ass. You're going to become a veterinarian, not some earthy scientist travelling the world. Focus on that when you get there. You can try again many times. I'll help you



out if you need it, okay?"

Emil and Michelle watched as Lili rubbed her eyes (thankfully lacking tears) and nodded to him. "Thank you, Brother. I'll try to do better next time."

"No, don't say that, remember? You *will* do better. You always do, don't you? It's what got you here, after all."

"Y-Yes," she timidly responded. "I know. I'm sorry if I made you worry."

"It's nothing," Vash smiled quite amicably in contrast to his stern look. He really seemed to share similar traits to Lukas in that sense. Just as Emil had that thought in his head, Vash turned to him. "You. Ice boy."

Emil blinked, flabbergasted. Was it by coincidence that Vash called him by his nickname, he wondered? "Um, yes?"

"I've heard your brother was quite the brainiac in biology. Med student, right?"

"Yes?" He wondered where he might have heard that from.

"And you're pretty smart, too. You were trying to study with Lili that one time."

"Yes...?"

Emil was holding his breath until he thought he would burst. Vash was staring at him with his teal-shaded eyes the entire time as if trying to break down any defenses he might have erected. How was it that Vash and Lili could possess the same eyes but have completely different effects on him?

"My sister says you're not a bad person. And you don't look like it. So I'm going to go ahead and grant permission to study with her. But! If I ever EVER here so much as a complaint from her or see a scratch that was your fault, I am going to make you regret even so much as *looking* at her, got it?"

"Yes. Very much. *Ahem*. Thank you?" He mentally cursed himself for sounding so incompetent and appearing so shocked, but who wouldn't be in the face of an overprotective brother?

Lili who had heard everything was equally as shocked that her brother would give her such freedom. "Brother, you're really letting me study with Emil?"

Her brother clicked his tongue and looked to the side as if embarrassed—or was it something else? "I figured you're not a little girl anymore. You're a grown lady, and I should start treating you like one. I know I can't protect you forever, but sometimes I just, you know, get caught up in the moment."

Emil knew that feeling all too well from experiencing it with Lukas. For now, he was relieved Vash didn't immediately get a misunderstanding and break his neck in front of his distressed Lili.

"Thank you, Brother," Lili smiled in such a way that Vash became flustered.

"Don't mention it. Let me know if anything happens as soon as possible, okay?"

"Okay."

Vash looked at his phone. "I've got class in five. I'll see you around." He paused and stared hard at Emil. His same looming personality returned once again. "I'll *especially* be looking at you, Ice

boy."

"S-Sure." Emil let out a small, deflating sigh as he saw Vash disappear from view. That experience could have gone a lot worse, but it may have gone a little better, too. He wondered what could have caused the accounting major to have a sudden change of heart. The last time he spoke with him, he recalled him claiming he would only allow boys to be friends with his sister if they had money.

*Well, I'm not exactly poor, but I sure I'm not the first person he would think of with a fat wallet,* he thought. Whatever the case, what was done was done. Vash gave Lili permission to study with him, and Emil was free to keep his little white-haired head in tact.

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Later that day, Emil returned to his dorms and found that it was pleasantly empty. He hadn't had the time to memorize Leon's schedule, though he was sure his friend would have been here to ask him about his midterms.

*Maybe he's finally getting off his ass and studying?* he thought. He was about to take a break before getting started on his chemistry lab report when he got a call.

"Leon?" he said aloud and checked to see that it was none other than Lukas. Grunting, he answered it with a strong idea of why he was calling him at this time. "Hello...Brother?"

"How was your test?" was the first thing his brother said.

Emil's face fell. "Why do you know when my tests are?"

"I'm your older brother. I know these things."

"No older brother does this!" Emil cursed and yanked his bangs in frustration. "If you're asking, I think I did fine."

"Think?" Lukas repeated. "Why only 'think'? Did you not do well?"

"Okay, I *know* I did fine. Happy?"

"Better, but I would have liked to hear you say you did great."

"I'm not like that. You know that." Emil sat back and came up with some way of throwing the conversation towards his brother. "So how's life at med school? Is Mathias giving you any trouble?" He would have asked about his studies being extra work, but his oh-so-capable brother never had any studying problems.

"Life without Mathias is fine," Lukas replied. "A life with him is...difficult."

Emil smirked, glad his brother couldn't see his expression through the phone. "Why? Is he barging into your place again?"

"You can say that, yes. There are some other things..." In an unusual twist, he fell silent. He normally would pester his questions about his private and social life, how Leon was holding up, how his sex life was doing, the usual. Rather than that... "I need to go, little brother. I'll talk with you later. Study hard."

"Eh? Um, okay? Bye, Luk—Bye *Big Brother*."

"Goodbye."

*Well that was certainly weird*, Emil thought as he hung up. Something urgent must have happened for Lukas to hang up without trailing off into nosy discussion. Whatever it was, it didn't warrant too much of his attention. If it had been, he was sure Lukas would pay him a personal visit, something he was glad didn't happen.

With that being out of the way, he decided to check his E-mail for any new messages. One such message stuck out, the one about the choir club.

*Oh yeah, that thing with Eduard...* He read through the announcement and saw that the first meeting was going to be in two days' time. He made a mental note of reminder and went to check for anything else. No other messages stood out, so he closed his computer and went to his lab report.

"Alright, time to get this done," he sighed and gazed out the window just for a second. A cow ran across the Opal Hall courtyard.

"Wait. A *cow*?"

Indeed. It was a cow. There was a team of students running after it, laughing the entire time. From a quick glance, Emil couldn't tell what kind of students they were, but they were wearing matching vests. They must've belonged to one of the fraternities around campus.

"Oh gods..." he sighed. It must've been from the agricultural department. He was honestly surprised there was an agricultural program that involved livestock here in Eliatha University. There just so happened to be something for everyone here. For all he knew there might have been a basket weaving major here. He wouldn't have been surprised.

*Go dragons.*

## Chapter 20

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The chemistry midterm went in a similar fashion as the biology midterm. Lili had seated herself far from Emil, so he wasn't able to tell whether she finished on time or not. Even if she did, she had told him at the beginning of the exam to "not wait for me." Apparently she had errands to run later.

*What kind of errands do you get as freshman?* he wondered after handing in his scantron and testing packet to Gupta. His professor, Sadık, was busy watching his students like a hawk to notice the ones turning in their exams. Today, for whatever reason, he wore an interesting mask that covered his eyes, making him look like a star in a theatrical performance—or a bank robber in a heist.

"You'll see weirder things than Sadık, little brother," Lukas had told him, so Emil took this as it was and left the lecture hall. While he didn't have errands to go to, he did have a choir club meeting to go to right now. It was going to be his first club meeting as a university student. He hoped there wouldn't be an immature cast of choir enthusiasts in the same fashion he had experienced at the anime club at Academy W. He shuddered at the thought of meeting people who were "hardcore" into choir practice. Could that even be a thing?

The choir club was situated at the visual and performing arts section of the campus, far from the natural sciences and in between the language arts department. While not of concern for this trip, the engineering and mathematics department was the furthest from the arts departments, making Emil wonder how Eduard was able to keep up being the club president and majoring in an engineering and mathematics field. He was quite amazing in his own right.

After studying some of the maps placed outside the department and nearly walking into the main auditorium, Emil found his way at the little black box theater on the side of one of the auditoriums used for music majors. He recognized three members upon entering: Toris, Raivis, and Eduard. He thought that was it until he saw Charles chatting with some of the female members. His face dropped.

"Emil!" Eduard spotted him and walked up to him with a shining grin. Emil thought he had seen this face many times before with Leon and smug-ass businesslike grin, but Eduard appeared to have some amount of sincerity that let his guard down. All the same, the choir club president took his hand out for Emil to shake. Emil shook his hand with an attempted firm grip as Leon taught him. He wondered if it was passable.

"Glad to see you made it!" the president smiled.

"Y-Yeah," Emil awkwardly smiled. "I'm glad, too." He wanted to ask himself why he made such a response. It was outright stupid.

"You already know Toris. Recognize anyone else?"

Emil pointed out Raivis and Charles.

"That's great! We're still waiting for a few members to come in, so you can meet some people or just hang out until we get started."

"Alright," he responded as Eduard went over to Toris. Not wanting to meet new people or get

associated with Charles' bragging fest, Emil went over to Raivis and took a seat by him. "Hey. I didn't know you were in this club."

"I didn't know you were in it, either," he shyly responded.

*What is with me and attracting shy or weird people?* Emil wondered with a crooked smile. "So, do you have any experience with singing?"

Raivis nodded. "I was in the choir back in Latvia. My instructors always told me I can hit the high notes if I try, so I thought it would be nice if I saw how things work here. What about you?"

Emil nervously chuckled. "I don't have any experience, actually. I'm just here because my friend and my brother told me it's good to be part of something that's not just my major, you know?"

"I guess?"

The two made small talk for a while until the last of the club members arrived along with a voluptuous-looking woman. She appeared to be older than the students, though not by more than fifteen years, leading Emil to presume she must have been the advisor. On the minds of some of the male club members was the fact that this woman happened to be sporting a rather large pair of—as Leon might put them—knockers.

"Eduard, how are things going?" she asked in a cheery, womanly voice. Had it not been because of her age, Emil might have taken her to be a sorority mother.

"Everything's fine. They're all here, and we have some members from previous years. Are you able to stick around for the first few minutes?"

"I'd love to, if you don't mind," she chortled.

*Definitely the motherly type*, Emil thought to himself.

"Everyone, this is Irunya, our club advisor. She's an instructor here in the Agriculture and Nutritional Sciences. She'll be checking up on us every now and then."

As she waved to the new and old club members, Emil wondered how it was possible for someone to balance such opposing fields. Mathias and Lukas had somehow done it with their interior design club, but they weren't presidents or advisors. This was amazing. He could never hope to keep up with everything.

"Right, we're just going to start out by asking all of the new ones today: how many of you have been in a choir before?"

Raivis and a few scattered others raised their hands.

"That's good. We have some people with experience under their belts. Alright, and have any of you performed in a professional performance before?"

Again, most of the people who had previously raised their hands went up again.

"Great! That means you know where your ranges are. So the first thing I'm going to do is categorize you into four groups: sopranos and mezzos over here, altos and tenors over at the back, baritones and bass there, and for the rest of you who don't know, come over this way. Toris and I will test your vocal range and sort you out."

As the experienced members went into their circles—Raivis and Charles included—Emil went with the select few other stragglers to test his vocal range. He wasn't too versed in the vocal ranges, though he knew enough that sopranos were on the higher range while altos were in the middle. He wasn't a bass, that much he knew.

In Toris and Eduard's hands were flat, compact mirror-sized instruments that made notes when they blew into a little pipe. They were asked to try and match the note, and from there, they would sort the students according to range by ear. On Emil's turn, he made the note and was sorted as a tenor\*.

"Don't go anywhere yet," Eduard quickly said as he finished the last one. "That's just to get a placeholder so we know where you fall on the range. Depending on whether you can hit low or high notes will give us a better idea of where to place you."

And so it went that each one was tested of their vocal range. Some of the old members were retested in case their range changed over the course of summer. Irunya watched for most of the time but had to leave early to attend a seminar.

"That's everyone!" Eduard clapped his hands at the end of the testing. "To wrap this meeting up, we're going to show you how we normally warm up before actual practice." He signaled for a handful of students to follow him over and face the rest of the club members.

Emil watched on as the president went to a worn grand piano in the back of the black box stage and sat down. The bench gave an unsatisfying creak as he adjusted himself, making Emil get a rough sense of just how old this instrument was. Eduard then played the basic scales, starting from the low end and moving up. As he did so, select students from the group became to vocalize the notes. The bass started first, transitioning into the baritones, to the tenors, the altos, the mezzo-sopranos, and finally to the few sopranos.

It sounded easy enough, he thought. He could get by this club without having to stand out. There were plenty of tenors in the group he could fit in with. The only thing that got to him was just how similar this was to a real class. It wasn't so much that the club was a place to share interests and hobbies; this was the real deal. From the sound of things, they were going to be practicing and holding a real performance. He wondered if he should have talked more with Toris and Eduard about this before deciding to sign up for this club.

*Ah, well. It's not like it'll be anything too serious,* he shrugged and listened as Eduard began talking about what to expect for the rest of the club's year.

"Last year, we won first place in the regional choir competition. Now that some of our old friends have graduated, we're going to have to pick up the pace and do our best if we're going to keep that streak going, but the important thing is to try your hardest and have fun. This year, Irunya has made a few arrangements for our club. We're going to be performing in four recitals on campus and two in Chottsym University."

There was a buzz of murmurs about the number of recitals before Eduard continued.

"Our meetings are going to be held at the most convenient times available. I've already set up a poll online where you can vote for the times you're free. Try to get your results in as soon as possible so we can schedule the next meeting. And even though this is the first time we've all met the new members, don't forget to practice and keep your voices in shape. And with that, this concludes our first meeting."

On his announcement, the students began to scatter out of the building, most of the old members

talking casually about being a little rough or looking forward to seeing Eliatha University's rival campus again. Emil grabbed his book bag and was about to head out when Raivis caught up with him.

"Hey, Emil, so you're a tenor, huh?"

"Hmm? I guess so." He recalled Raivis sorting himself into a higher range. "You really do have a high vocal range. From the sound of your voice, I might've thought..." His voice trailed off, seeing as how he might have offended him.

"Oh, that," Raivis laughed. "You'd be surprised at how your talking voice can be different from your singing voice."

"Huh. I guess I'm the same," Emil decided. "My friend said I have an unusually deep voice for my looks, whatever that means."

Raivis also didn't seem to know, so they left that subject to focus on another.

"So how do you exactly practice your range? I thought this club would be like one of those things at high school like a fan club or a video game club. This is like a class without credits."

"You've never been to a choir club rehearsal before?" Raivis asked, and Emil shook his head.

"You're right. It's similar to a class, but it's still a place for people who have the same interests. That's why we're all here, right?"

Emil had to sheepishly admit, "I'm actually here because my brother said it'd be good if I joined a club, and my friend and Eduard sort of signed me up on it. Not that I mind, anyway. It's just... different."

"Oh. I'm sure we're going to have fun. Eduard, Toris, and Irunya seem very nice, and EU's famous for its choir club."

"Really? I guess that first place in that competition is a big deal, after all."

"I would think," Raivis chuckled. "Eliatha's regionals aren't a joke. Er, I'm getting off topic. You were asking about how to practice? I could show you before the next meeting so you're not lost. It's easier than just telling you."

Emil pulled out his phone. "Okay. I can meet you...Is Friday night good for you?"

"Yeah, that's fine. Hold on..." Raivis began reading his number and E-mail address to Emil, and recorded down his in exchange. Once that was taken care of, Raivis said he had to make his way to the other end of the campus to the engineering departments.

"Alright, I'll let you go. See you Friday, then."

"Bye, Emil!" Raivis smiled and took off down the road. When he was out of sight, Emil let out a tired sigh.

"That wasn't so bad," he yawned and decided to call it a day. He figured he would stop by the dining commons and get something to eat before returning to his dorm.

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Leon was inside the dorm, tilting his chair back and forth with his headphones ready to slip off. He occasionally stopped to readjust the headpiece on his head before resuming his strict rocking

rhythm.

"Hey, I'm back," Emil flatly told him like a bored child might to his deadbeat father. "Hey. Leon. I'm talking to you."

"Huh?" Leon stopped and looked to his roommate. "Oh, hey, Ice. You went somewhere?"

"Choir club."

"How was that?"

"Fine. I learned I'm a tenor."

Leon apparently didn't have anything to comment on because all he said to that was, "That's cool."

"You have a higher voice than me, so maybe you're an alto. Either way, I don't think choir's the kind of thing for you. So what about you? I never heard back from your cinematography club."

"Oh, I had two meetings already," Leon said as if talking about the weather.

"Two? Why didn't you say anything?"

Leon shrugged. "Thought you didn't care about that stuff. So, did you have fun?"

Emil huffed and set his bag down. "I guess. Eduard and Toris were there."

"Uh huh." Judging from that type of response, Emil knew he was checking his phone. He had the strangest impulse to go up to his unsuspecting friend and smash his hand down on the tip of his chair. That would be a treat to watch.

But, he didn't.

"Did you eat yet?"

"I'll get something later. I'm just thinking about stuff."

"Stuff," Emil rolled his eyes. "I'll leave you to it, then." He was about to go back to his homework when he saw a little poster on the Leon's side of the posting board. "Leon, what in Eliatha is this?"

It was a picture of a cow.

"Oh, don't worry about it."

"I'm a little worried. You don't have random pictures of a cow printed out back home."

"No, it's fine," he insisted. "It's a present from the cinematography club."

Emil raised an eyebrow. "What were you doing at your meetings?"

"Stuff," came the vague answer.

"Stuff. Right. No, really. I saw people chasing a cow after my bio midterm. Was that your little charade?"

"Maybe." That meant "yes" in Emil's book of Leon-isms. He knew there was more to the cow and the club than met the eye, but he decided it was best not to ask questions. His mind was occupied with different things, and it would make him feel better the less he knew.



"Oh. Just to make sure," he suddenly said, remembering his brother's irritable nagging.

Leon looked up from his screen. "Yeah?"

"You're not selling drugs, are you?"

Leon smirked and burst out laughing. "Pfft, what? Did your brother tell you to ask me that?"

"Just a thought. I never know with you."

His friend was still smirking. "I'm clean, Ice. I don't sell drugs. I could, if I wanted. You wanna help me make some good money?"

"No," he grunted. That was the end of that, but not the end of the cow story.

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## Chapter End Notes

\*I actually did some small research on the side to cast Iceland as a tenor. I even went on my piano and listened to his character songs to see what vocal range he could hit.

## Chapter 21

“You’re supposed to breathe through your stomach.” Again, Raivis corrected Emil by hovering his hand against his abdomen and instructing him to breathe.

“How does that even make sense? There’s only one place your air goes to and that’s your lungs.”

Technically, the air passed through more than that; it did go into the stomach if one counted the blood vessels, muscles, and other microscopic cavities that delivered the necessary molecules. Here, however, Emil was trying to be general.

“It’s not actually, your stomach; it’s the muscles,” Raivis corrected himself. “You need to develop them and learn to breathe through your diaphragm. It’s actually not that far from your stomach than you’d think. I’d show you where it is, but, you know...”

Emil got it. “If you want, you can show me where yours is so I can get a better bearing.”

Raivis demonstrated by tucking his hands underneath his ribcage and positioning them towards the center of his abdomen. He then continued by explaining all the while. “If you take a deep breath, you’ll notice there’s an area besides your lungs that kind of puffs out like so.” He took a breath. “You can try it.” He watched and waited for his sort-of pupil to do the same. “Did you feel it?”

“Not really...”

“Maybe you’re not a stomach breather. Try to relax your stomach.”

“Relax my stomach?” Emil echoed. “How?”

“You just do. It’s like letting yourself go.” He gave him a quizzical look. “Really, you’ve never seen your stomach rising when you sleep?”

“I usually sleep on my side. Maybe it happens, but I don’t pay attention.”

“That’s weird. It should happen. Do you exercise?”

Emil didn’t need to be asked twice before nodding. Just the other day, Leon had woken him up at the crack of dawn to go to the gym. He even made sure he was breathing properly, lest he suffer Lukas’ wrath. For that, every part of him hurt. He didn’t think it would affect today’s lesson, so he hadn’t told anything about it to Raivis until now.

But apparently it did have something to do with vocal training because Raivis believed this would be useful. “If you have strong stomach muscles, it will make it easier for you to hold in longer notes. I-It’s partially theory, but it does help to have some development—so you know how you’re supposed to breathe, you know.”

“...Right.” Emil still needed to work on that. Leon made a comment about how he would get too tense and not deliver enough oxygen to his muscles.

“Ice, like, seriously, it’s not that hard to remember to freaking breathe. You need it to keep yourself alive, so just, like, do it.”

*"Just, like, do it,"* Emil thought in a mocking impression of Leon's voice. He hated it when his friend used his condescending tone; it was often a reminder that there was something he was still better than him at. At least studying wasn't one of them, he decided, still miffed that Leon was studying behind his back.

"Emil?" Raivis said. "Should we try again?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, sure."

They continued practicing for roughly ten minutes before Emil finally understood how to use his diaphragm.

"That's it!" Raivis exclaimed. "Emil, you did it! That's how you're supposed to do it!"

"Um, thank you," he smiled. "It really wasn't that hard, after all."

"It definitely won't be now. I'm guessing Eduard and Toris are going to teach us the same technique during the next practice, but now you'll be ahead."

"That's good. With how long it took me, I think it's best we don't waste their time." He paused and let that process. "Not that I'm trying to waste your time."

"You're not, honest! I'm glad I can help you. It's really boring being by myself."

Funny that he should mention that at all, Emil thought and wondered if he should dwell into that topic. "Don't you have roommates? Do you live on-campus?"

"I do," he said, "but I'm in a single."

"You're an R.A., then?"

Raivis flopped his arms to his sides. "No, I just live by myself."

That was odd. Singles were only granted to those who were in need of certain "privileges." The most common reason for having a single was because someone was a residential assistant. Otherwise, there were those who appealed to the university's housing department, those with a lot of money, and those with "issues." If Raivis wasn't a residential assistant, then there were only two other options left. Emil could only hope his family had a lot of money.

To better tread on the topic, he decided to ask a question more related to his lifestyle than his reasons for having a single room. "Doesn't it get lonely by yourself? I mean, you must have known it would be harder to meet other people, right?"

Raivis smiled in a strange manner. Emil couldn't tell if he was being ashamed understanding about this. "I got to meet you, and besides, it's better for me that I don't see too many people. I get a little..."

*Oh gods.*

"...nervous around most people. And my parents thought I would function better if I had a place all to myself for the first year."

That was still too vague for Emil. It wasn't enough information to get an idea of whether or not Raivis intentionally chose to live in a single without any other strings attached. It was best, he thought, to keep his concerns to himself and just be thankful that Raivis agreed to help him.

"Are you good for today, or do you think you want to practice some more, Emil?" Raivis asked as if hearing his closing thoughts.

"I think I'm good. I don't want to keep you, what with you being a materials science major. Why did you choose that major, anyway?"

Raivis didn't sound too confident with himself as he gave him his answer. "My parents wanted me to do something that might make some money. I'm not too great with studying terminology, so being a doctor was out of the question. I don't have enough capacity to become a full-fledged engineer, so there went that option. So, I thought maybe materials science would be good for me. Although...I think the only reason I was able to come here was because I'm from a country most people forget about...that and there's my weird condition."

Emil didn't bother calling him out on that last blurb and let him continue talking. At this point, they had begun walking towards the dormitories. "I think you were able to come here for more than just being from Latvia, Raivis," he said. "If Eliatha University wanted you, it has to be more than just where you came from. There's ambition and intelligence involved."

"Maybe?" He didn't sound too sure. "I was always told I can do great things—only when I'm pushed to extremes."

*Extremes?* To what extremes might those have been, Emil wondered? He didn't want to know, and he was sure Raivis wasn't about to open up and tell him his life story.

"Um, see? So you can push yourself to do great things. So it's not just you."

"I hope you're right, Emil," he smiled. They had reached Opal Hall now. "This is your stop, right?"

Emil nodded. "Yep. And your place is down there, so I guess I'll see you at next practice. Hey, thank you for practicing with me. I know I'm not the best student at this stuff."

"No, it's alright," Raivis insisted. "It was fun being able to talk to someone. I should be thanking you."

"Um, you're welcome, then?" Emil decided he should leave now. "Er, good night, Raivis. I'll see you at practice."

"Bye, Emil," he gratefully said and let Emil retreat into his hall. Before leaving, Emil gave him a short wave and disappeared into the elevator, wondering if he could catch Leon studying in their room again.

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It didn't look like Leon was studying after all, and if he was Emil didn't know it. He wasn't there. Leon's laptop and backpack were gone, too.

"Classes are done for the day. Where is he?" He felt he had the liberty to speak aloud since he was

the only one staying here. The first thing that came to his mind was that stupid cinematography club. He wondered what a business savvy Asian and the Eliatha University sports champion would have in common besides film studies.

Then again, to be fair, Emil wasn't a movie enthusiast, himself. He rarely watched television as a child, and before long, when his parents decided Lukas was old enough to take care of his dear little brother by himself, they got rid of their televisions altogether. Since then, Emil could hardly understand the appeal of watching moving pictures on a screen. He supposed it required a certain attention to detail—or a certain attention span at all.

Emil sat down at his desk and popped open his laptop. He checked his grades to see if the midterms had been graded yet and saw nothing of the sort there.

*Weird*, he thought. He at least expected the chemistry midterm to be posted since all it consisted of was a bubble-in sheet. “Maybe the TA’s are lazy...” Lukas had mentioned something about professors who did that. There were some instructors on campus, even in Eliatha University, who would wait to publish grades at the end of the term. When that happened, there was a frantic increase in the number of visitors at office hours to get extra points to pass their classes. It was a mess. Honestly, it was a miracle such professors were allowed to teach at the institution, but the most understandable reason was because of the money they brought in and the research they conducted; after all, those were the main differences between colleges and universities.

Grades lacking aside, there was nothing for Emil to do now. With midterms being recently finished, there weren't any new assignments posted in his two major classes, and he didn't have to worry about his culinary class. His body was sore from yesterday, and he recently finished some breathing exercises with Raivis. It was an unexpectedly odd feeling, to be sure.

“Now what?”

Emil didn't have any particular hobbies unlike Leon who had too many. He wasn't an intense gamer, he didn't have close friends to “hang out” with, and he wasn't involved in clubs that practiced any exciting activities. Moreover, there was little to occupy himself with now that Leon was gone. Before, he at least had homework and studying to keep up with in high school. If he was finished, Leon was there to bother him, but never did it get out of hand. Emil couldn't believe he was wishing this, but he wanted Leon to bother him. It was just too nice of an evening to be bored like this.

Calling Leon out of the blue seemed like a terrible decision. It might have made him appear desperate for his friend's attention or the kind of person who only had one friend—which was almost true. So, Emil decided to put off on contacting his roommate.

*If Lukas were here, he'd tell me to study. What's there to study?* He could study ahead, but he didn't see the point in expending his energy when he might forget the material later on. Should he take up a hobby right now, perhaps?

*What hobby could I even take up?* he wondered. There was little he could do without spending too much time or money investing in. The best he could come up with was reading in leisure, but books took up space and electronic books hurt his wrists and eyes.

“Fuck this,” he cursed and went for his shower caddy. He was going to go to sleep early tonight. The weekend was coming up, and he could have a whole two days to himself to relax when he woke up. Leon could have his own little fun wherever he was.

As always, there was no one inside the bathroom when Emil entered; it was squeaky clean, too. He had to be grateful for Cheng's suggestion on living in Opal Hall because as some students had mentioned, the bathrooms in some other halls were unbelievably filthy. Emil had heard nightmarish stories of noodles being dumped down the toilets, laundry in the sinks to avoid paying for the machines, and other ungodly and unspeakable leavings scattered and painted on the walls. The worst part was that it didn't stop at the men's restrooms.

Emil barely had to think about this as he brushed his teeth and then headed straight for the showers. Why in Eliatha would Mathias want to live in Ruby Hall? That sounded insane.

*Maybe it's because he has more things to do than I do,* Emil thought as he dried himself off and changed into his clothes. He heard some noises outside and didn't bother with the source when he came out. His room wasn't too far away. He slipped on his shower shoes and squished his way back to the safety of his dorm.

And then, someone was waiting outside for him.

"Alas, I have found the abode of my ice queen!"

"Gods fuck!" Emil screamed and stepped back. He nearly slipped backwards and hit his head on the door if it wasn't because he was holding onto the door handle.

It was Romeo, and somehow he had intruded into Opal Hall (or did he live here?) and located the exact floor and bathroom Emil was using. On that note, Emil realized his stalker should have known he was a man. Why else would he look at the men's bathroom? The women's bathroom was on the other end of the hall, after all.

"Witness that which has captivated my eyes and cast my heart down into the depths of the unknown territory of romance!"

Emil wanted him to leave. He would have kicked him if it wasn't unethical. Imagine that: a white-haired nervous wreck using his shower shoes to kick a love-drunk fool with white flowers and a card in his nether regions.

"Romeo. It's Romeo, right?"

"The ice queen has remembered my name!" he cried, clutching his free hand to his heart as though having a heart attack. Emil almost felt guilty for wishing he would have one right then and there. His room was right there. How long would it take for him to get his key through the door and slip inside?

*But that means he'll know where I live. How in Eliatha did he find me, anyway?*

Whatever, he thought. He would play along for now. If anything happened, he could always scream for Toris. Feliks was hopelessly unreliable.

"Yes, I know your name. So will you tell me what you're doing with those...things?"

"These are for you, my sweet little popsicle!" Ten thousand nerves shot Emil frozen solid at that last word. "I've searched far and wide in the housing roster, and imagine my surprise when I found out you were rooming with Leo all this time!"

“Leo?” Emil raised his eyebrows. “You mean Leon.”

“The name does not matter as long as the person’s heart is beautiful, upon which in this case, yours is.”

Now he was upset. “Do you even know my name then?”

Disturbing as it was, Emil could do nothing but watch as Romeo pushed back his split bangs and offered the bouquet of white flowers and card to him. He nonverbally rejected them. “I was surprised, too, when I discovered you changed your name so you could be with your family. It’s a noble and gallant move, I’ll say, but your beauty cannot escape me, my love. What say you to my advances, my sweet Emily? Will you not accept my heart?”

“Emily?! Fucking Emily! I’m *Emil*! I’m not a—! Look, I’m a *guy*! I didn’t change my name; I’ve always been a guy! And I don’t love you, let alone like you! You’re gross and creepy! Get out of my face before I call security on you!” He expected Romeo’s heart to shatter in a thousand pieces and slump over like a dark raincloud, but instead as he pushed him to the side and around the corner, he only saw awe slapped silly on his face. What was wrong with this guy?

“Shoo!” Emil barked as he might to a dog. “Out! OUT!” When Romeo was backed down the stairs just enough, he immediately turned for his door and sprinted straight for the keyhole. He smashed his keycard into the slot and disappeared inside, towel, shower caddy, and all.

Right after Romeo was sure to have disappeared, Emil took out his phone and began to dial a number he now knew by heart. He didn’t have to wait for two ringtones before the person on the other end picked up.

“Hello?”

“I need you to be here right now. Get over here as soon as you can, Big Brother.”

## Chapter 22

Not twenty minutes later, Lukas somehow showed up to Emil's dorm.

*How in Eliatha did he get inside the hall? He doesn't have a key, and there's no one coming in and out of the building to hold the door for him.*

He would have to go with the possibility that Lukas simply had his ways when it concerned his dear little brother. As of now, he was expressing that very concern for him as he stood looming ominously down at Emil. "Now then, why did you call?"

"Glad you're here," Emil grunted. *For once.* "There was some freaky stalker who found out where I lived, and I'm too scared to go outside of my room now. Leon's not here, so, I don't know. Fuck. I thought you could keep me company."

"Language, Ice," Lukas reminded him, only his reminders were far less sincere than Cheng was with Leon.

"Sorry," Emil apologized. "I should've asked if you were busy."

"Busy?" his brother echoed. "I'm never busy if it concerns you." He paused. "So, this stalker. What does he look like?"

"Have you ever seen the Vargas brothers?"

Lukas stared for a moment before replying with a question of his own. "Are they still working at the D.C.?"

"Yes."

"Then, yes."

"Yeah, he looks like them. Leon told me he's their cousin. His name is Romeo and he's loud. He should be carrying flowers and a card if he's still in the building."

"Would you like me to hurt him?"

Emil was anything but confident. Lukas wasn't out of shape, but he wasn't burly and fit by any means. There wasn't much he could do hurt anyone out of his boundaries physically—of course, he hadn't accounted for mental or emotional levels of pain.

"Don't hurt him, Lu—Brother. Do you want to get evicted? Also, you're talking like a freaking mobster."

"I have my ways," he coolly spoke, not reacting at all to the thought of being kicked out of Eliatha University's medical program.

"No. Lukas, I called you here because I was scared. I don't want some creep snaking his way into my room when I'm by myself. I just wanted someone to be with me." He softly cursed. "Gods, I sound like a kid."



“No, I think that’s very considerate that you called me and not that Asian boy.”

“*Leon*,” Emil corrected him.

“Leon. Whatever. The point is, I’m here and your roommate is not, and since I’m here, I’m asking you if you’d like me to ‘take care’ of your little situation.”

Again, Emil made a face. “Lukas, you *really* sound like a mobster now. I just want someone to be here until I think it’s safe to go back outside. I don’t want someone harassing me right after I come out of the shower.”

Lukas blinked. “He saw you naked?”

“No!” Emil roared, still able to be shocked at his brother’s bluntness. “I came out of the bathroom when I was dressed *after I showered*. Is that a better picture for you?”

“Sure.”

*Sure?* “Look, it’s just for an hour, maybe. Romeo doesn’t know who you are, so if he happens to be here somewhere, he won’t try to ask you stupid questions or go looking for my room number. I don’t know if he knows which room I live in, but I know he knows which floor I’m on. And he said something about going to housing. Maybe he broke in, even. Oh gods, Lukas, I don’t know what to do. Brother. Big Brother. Sorry.”

Emil would have gone off and talked some more, but a rare sound interrupted him before he could continue. Lukas was *laughing*.

“Pfft. Eh heh. Eh heh heh heh heh.”

“Lukas?” Emil frowned. “What’s so funny?” It was honestly creepy seeing him laugh in person. His older brother often chuckled over the phone when he was teasing him, but rarely did he see the whole package in real-time, smile and all.

Lukas wasn’t the kind of guy who laughed loudly and obnoxiously like Mathias did; he wasn’t even like Cheng who laughed vocally but almost politely if one could even do that. Emil had heard his brother laugh enough times in the past to know when it was happening, but he never got over how peculiar it was. His brother was always something of a quiet laugher who suppressed any loud noises his lungs and diaphragm (go figure) might have wanted to expel. Interestingly, however, Emil had come to realize this was just how his brother always laughed.

“...Ice,” his brother was still chuckling, “you need to listen to yourself.”

Emil furrowed his eyebrows. “What about myself?”

“You’re so animated. You aren’t like this at home. It’s cute.”

*Cute?* No, this wasn’t cute. It was creepy. There was a stalker outside who thought he was a girl, and all his brother was doing was laughing about how his concerns were cute?

“Thanks a lot, Lukas.”

He calmed down by now. “It’s good to see you so healthy, Ice.”

“Don’t...” Emil clicked his tongue. “Lukas, Brother, please...”

“I’m sorry, Ice,” his brother emptily apologized. “It’s just so rare for me to see this side of you. I know you have a hard time expressing yourself sometimes, so for you to do this right here and now is a relief for me. I’m glad you’re having fun in college.”

“Buh...wha...?” Emil was speechless. “No! I was legit scared! I don’t even know how he found me! What am I supposed to do about this?”

He didn’t like the look in his brother’s eyes at his question. A smile crept across his face like a sinister crescent moon that cut through his lips. “You can always ask housing to move you out of this room, Ice. You won’t have to stay in this place anymore. We can move you to Sapphire Hall. It’s a nice place. It’s quiet. You’ll like it there.”

“No!” Emil protested. “I don’t want to move! I like it here with my view and the top bunk and my roommate—okay, I like him *most* of the time, but I don’t want to have to start all over again.”

Lukas raised an eyebrow. “So having this Romeo affair being taken care of isn’t important?”

“It *is* important; I just don’t want to move out to solve it.”

“Fair enough. Then there’s only one way to take care of this once and for all.”

Emil frowned. Was his brother pulling an ultimatum?

“Here’s what’s going to happen: you’re going to find him for me right now, Ice. Once you do, you will show him to me, and I will have a nice little talk with him. When the talk is done, there will not be anything left to worry about, guaranteed.”

“Lukas, you’re scaring me.” He had a feeling he would regret calling his brother, but not like this. A nice little talk, was it? Would that “talk” also involve weapons and illegal chemicals?

“That’s Big Brother to you, Ice,” Lukas smiled disturbingly. “You will not be hurt. I promise you. If you’re worried about your ‘stalker’ being in the building, you will find him or you will not. If you do not, then all will be well for the night, and you can go pleasantly to sleep. If it helps, you can run around the perimeter of the building to make sure he won’t pull a balcony scene on you. Is that simple enough to follow?”

Emil had to swallow his questions and fears and nod.

“Good. Run along, then, little brother.”

“Gods, Lukas...”

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Romeo wasn’t on Emil’s floor; for that matter, he wasn’t on the fourth, third, second, or first. Lukas wasn’t accompanying Emil directly, but the entire time he searched through the quiet halls, he could feel a pair of eyes glued coldly to his back. Many times he looked back to see if he could catch his brother hovering behind him, but he never saw him once.

*Why can't you be like a normal brother?* he wondered. *And where is everyone?* Normally on a Friday night like this, there were students coming in and out of the doors and taking the elevators. Some went home on the weekends, and some went to parties or into the town. Even then, there was always someone in the lounge or passing through the stairs or elevators. Tonight, however, it was quiet—too quiet.

Emil's (and presumably Lukas') search led him out of the building and into the courtyard. He had decided Romeo wasn't in the building having searched the men's restrooms. He had refused to venture into the women's stalls in the event a residential assistant might write him up.

"Where in Eliatha's name is he?" Emil wondered. "Just when I never wanted to see him again..."

"...woes drown in in your depths of sorrow and tears. Rinse off that which has saturated my heart in pure emotion."

*Never mind.* Emil followed the soliloquy to its source. Who should he find but Romeo burying himself in self-wrought agony and despair in the school gardens?

"Hey. Lover boy," Emil snapped at him. "Get up." He shouldn't have been so frank and rude to the Vargas boy, but he wasn't in the best of moods. What was supposed to be an uneventful night to himself had turned into a ghastly fest of stalking from two ends of encounters he hoped never to experience more than once. Also, he wondered, where was Lukas?

"Emily, my sweet snowflake, you have returned to me!" Romeo bounded forth in a gallant leap, all signs of grief completely washed away from his tearful face. What a rebound, Emil thought.

Fortunately for Emil, Romeo wasn't nearly as fast as Leon, and having been struck by him or snuck up on multiple times, he had gotten used to these kinds of maneuvers. It helped that he watched Lukas pull this move with Mathias plenty of times. At just the right moment, he sidestepped out of the way and watched as Romeo wrapped his arms around nothing but the empty space in front of him.

"Listen, Romeo, I have someone you're going to talk to." He knew Romeo was going to spout some lovey-dovey nonsense, so he continued to speak, hoping Lukas wasn't too far away. "He's going to sort this thing out between you and me, and hopefully the two of us will walk away from this happy. Sound good? Good." He wasn't sure what to do or say from here. Lukas hadn't told him if he was going to pop out of nowhere and take Romeo from behind, or simply walk up and talk to him like he would to any normal person.

As it would turn out, Lukas wouldn't do either of those things. The manner in which he exposed himself was so quick and silent that he could have been mistaken for a quick flash of a bypassing shadow. Emil barely blinked when his brother came out of nowhere and without warning, seized Romeo up in his arms and dragged him off to some secluded place. Emil wasn't sure if he was supposed to follow Lukas or not, but considering he hadn't said more than wanting to "talk" with Romeo, he thought it was best to remain where he was.

Some odd number of minutes passed before Romeo's ultimate return. When he finally emerged from the shadows, he was no longer carrying his bouquet and card. Emil wondered if Lukas had taken them somewhere and dumped them in a nearby garbage can.

"Evening, Emil," Romeo said to him quiet normally—a little too normally. "Nice night to start the weekend, huh?"

“Uh...yeah?” Emil didn’t know if this was a trick. He looked to the side to see if his brother was making sure nothing happened. “Oh, uh, hey, you remembered my name,” he thought to add.

Romeo chuckled. “What are you talking about? Of course I know your name. Anyway, I’ll see you later, alright?”

“What?” he blinked. “When? Where?”

Romeo shrugged. “Depends. I’ll probably see you at the D.C. or the housing office, right? Everyone’s gotta go there sometime.”

“Sure...” Emil eyed him. “Romeo, are you feeling alright?”

Romeo looked genuinely confused. What had Lukas done to him? “Yeah. Why? Is there something wrong with my clothes?”

He shook his head. “Your clothes are fine. Sorry.” He felt that Romeo should have been the one apologizing, but this whole scenario was just so damn weird. “Hey, so, where do you live, again?”

“Topaz,” came the answer, and considering the large population of girls living there, it was no surprise.

“Right. Uh, right. I’ll catch you later then. Bye...I guess...?”

Romeo chuckled again. “You sure there’s not something wrong with you, Emil? Whatever. Good night.” And he just walked away. There was no flamboyant act, no flowery words, just an ordinary man with no flame of love and passion. It was all rather eerie. It was like he had become a shell.

“What the fuck...?”

“Language, little brother,” came a ghostly voice from behind.

“Gods!” Emil jumped. “Lukas, you scared me!”

“That’s Big Brother to you.”

“Whatever!” he tossed his arms. “What did you do to him when I wasn’t looking?”

“What ever do you mean, my dear Ice? I did what I said I would do. I gave him a little talk.”

That was all but a lie. There had to have been more than that. “I know you did something. What was it? Blackmail? A death threat?”

“Ice,” Lukas chuckled, “that wouldn’t be giving me enough credit.”

“What?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Is this a trick question? Whatever. Yes. He was partially my responsibility.”

“Well then, tell you what, I think you’re ready. As for what, you will know when you follow all of my instructions.”

Emil blinked. “Have you gone completely mental?”

Lukas ignored him. “We may be half-brothers in blood, but we are full brothers in bond. On Tuesday, you will go to the Kirkland Kart and order three things in the following order: a cheese crumpet, a bag of pecan toffee, and a tall shot of black-bean midnight tea.”

“Wait. Stop. What the fuck? Lukas, you’re freaking me out. What’s going on?”

Again with the ignoring. “What are the three things you need to order on what day?”

Was he supposed to go along with it all? Was this an elaborate joke? Was Romeo in on it, too?

...*Fuck it.* “Tuesday, go to the Kirkland Kart and order a cheese crumpet, bag of pecan toffee, and a black-bean midnight tea tall shot. Do I have to drink the tea? I’ve heard bad things about it.”

“You melt the toffee in the tea in front of the vendor and dunk your crumpet in. Eat the crumpet and then drink one sip of the tea. That is all you need to do. You can finish it if you want.”

“Okay? Lukas, can you please tell me what this is all for?”

“All will be clear once you follow these instructions, Ice. Don’t worry. You’ll be safe.”

“What? No, Lukas, tell me. I’m being serious. What happened? What did you do to Romeo?”

“It’s fine, Ice.”

“You’re not telling me anything!” he shouted. “If you’re pulling me into some kind of crazy grand-scheme prank, I don’t want any part of it!”

“It’s fine,” Lukas repeated. “And this isn’t a prank, I assure you. Think about it: if I wanted to prank you, why would I start now? Weren’t you the one who called me? I just thought now would be a good time to get you started, seeing as how you’re still freshmeat.”

Emil had heard the term “freshmeat” plenty of times but never like the way his brother said it. It was like hearing it from the mouth of a sadistic serial killer with calm composure, only this sadistic serial killer happened to be his brother in the flesh.

Say he did play along with all of this. Then what? Lukas had said he would be safe, so was this perhaps some sort of special initiation rite? The closest thing he could think of to something like this in Eliatha University was the esteemed tea club that Cheng had been a part of way back when. Perhaps Lukas had been a member, too, and never bothered to mention it? It would at least explain the thing about the black-bean midnight tea, he thought.

“Fine. Okay. I’ll go along with this. Will I get all of my questions answered then?”

“Assuming you’re ready. I think it’s a good time right now. You’ve been looking healthy as of late.”

Emil sighed. “I give up. Can we be done with this?”

“Of course. Would you like me to call it a night?”

“Yes, please. And thank you for taking care of Romeo, I guess.”

“Anything for my precious little brother,” Lukas smiled. “Goodnight, then, Ice. I have studying to do. Study hard, but don’t forget to take a break every now and then, alright?”

“Yes, Brother,” he rolled his eyes. “Am I going to expect a call from you when you get back?”

“No.”

“Oh.” Emil paused. “Then...yeah, goodnight, too.” His brother never said anything else besides that last “No.” He watched him leave and head down the dormitories onto the main road to the graduate school when a small buzz of noise made its way into his ears. Like a movie, the campus gradually sprung to life with students walking around again and laughter heard from upstairs in open windows.

*I should go inside now*, Emil thought and turned to go back into Opal Hall when, as if materializing out of thin air, Leon sprung up from behind him. Emil screamed.

“Ice, like, is something wrong with you?” his friend laughed while Emil picked up the pieces of his sanity off the ground. “You’ve been standing outside for a while. And did you just come out of the shower? I can smell your soap.”

## Chapter 23

Midterm averages were posted at the beginning of lectures the following weekend. As professors went, it came as no surprise when the average was around fifty percent.

“The first midterms are usually like this. Study hard, get familiar with the questions, and you’ll do better on the next one.”

*Why can’t they be passable the first time through?* Emil upsettingly thought, wondering if he possibly received the average grade. If so, he would have kissed his chances at medical school goodbye. Fortunately for him, he wasn’t pursuing this route, but if it was anyone else, he was sure they would have to consider switching majors.

He chose, for now, to leave that in the past. With his midterms being multiple choice-based, there wasn’t anything he could do to justify his answers this time around. He would just have to study harder. He didn’t know what grade he got, but he couldn’t let that get in the way of the lecture now.

So, the first day of the school week rolled around. Tuesday followed soon after, meaning Emil had to prepare himself for his trial ahead.

The instructions his brother had given him still rang in his head like a repetitive hymn. *Crumpet, toffee, tea. Crumpet, toffee, tea.*

Emil hadn’t mentioned anything about his unusual encounter to Leon. He thought doing so would result in his friend following him all the way to the Kirkland Kart and making a snappy remark about how the whole thing was rigged to blow. To what extent things were going to blow, Emil had little to no idea; all he knew was that his brother gave him these instructions, and if his brother was the one to deliver the instructions in person, then he had complete confidence he would be unharmed.

*Then why am I so nervous?* He could feel his palms breaking into a clammy sweat as he waited for the Kirkland Kart to roll by the university pond on schedule. It had been a while since he had last seen the Kirkland Kart. Even though it was technically not autumn yet, whenever he heard the eerie chime of the kart’s music box powered by gods knew what wheel-mechanized device, he felt a cold breeze in the air beckoning forth an early winter.

Nearby at one of the university’s older buildings, an echoing bell rang from the far end of the campus. It must have been installed back in the day when school bells were relevant for keeping the time. Or was it the clock tower? Emil couldn’t remember which one it was, for their university had both.

Six rings indicated the western signal of evening approaching. Emil should have been eating dinner right now, but with his stomach working in preparation for the crumpet, toffee, and black-bean midnight tea, tonight’s special of lobster and three-cheese ravioli served little interest to him.

*Crumpet, toffee, tea. Crumpet, toffee, tea.*

Six rings after and on cue, the whimsical chime of the Kirkland Kart announced itself from a distance. The melody was similar to one of the local Eliathan folk rhymes but with a minor key

twang that gave it an unsettling vibe. Leon had shown Emil a video back in high school of an ice cream truck playing a similarly creepy tune. Hearing the Kirkland Kart approaching, Emil was reminded of that video.

*Gods, it's like the third Dragonfall is coming.*

Why did it have to move? Why did it need to play that music? Was it tradition? A running joke? The rules? Emil would never know. What he did know through Leon was that the Kirklands, themselves, owned the property of the kart along with other buildings in the university. Perhaps today he was even going to see one of them.

After what felt like ten minutes of standing under the only decent bright light along the Kirkland Kart's route, Emil approached the said vehicle and waited for the driver to stop.

"Uh...good evening," his words fumbled out of his mouth. "I need a cheese crumpet—Wait, I *would like* a cheese crumpet, one bag of pecan toffee, and one shot of black-bean midnight tea, please."

He watched in awkward silence as the vendor prepared the items and first handed him the toffee which needed no preparations. The crumpet came next, handed in a stamped paper baggy. Last but not least came the black-bean midnight tea probably to increase suspense. Emil watched with a twisting face as the oily black liquid poured out of a mysterious dispenser with no visible markings. The cup used was the standard western size, hardly bigger than a shot glass, but knowing the rumors circulating around the infamous caffeinated beverage, it appeared to be a liter of nonstop liquid torture.

"That'll be nine heta, please," the vendor said. It was a reasonable price to pay for the lot of three items, especially given this was on a university budget. Emil paid the amount with his E-card and prepared his little ritual in front of the shelf. The vendor watched on with unblinking eyes as the nervous freshman opened his bag of toffee and poured the entire contents into the shot cup. Never mind the liquid ready to overflow out of the tiny cup; he was too nervous to think about what the tea might have tasted like without the makeshift sweetener. Next, he pulled out his cheese crumpet and dunked the tip into the tea. To his prepared horror, a thick sticky layer of black material stuck to the crumpet like a thick paste or viscous honey.

*Oh gods, please let me live.*

He dared not smell it in fear that the stench would trigger a flight response in his brain. He reminded himself he was doing this to find out why his brother was able to pull that odd stunt with Romeo that Friday night. Hopefully this would all be worth it. With a lasting thought of eating his crumpet soon after trying the tea, he took his first bite and chewed as fast as he could without biting his tongue off.

The first round wasn't too bad. It was like consuming chocolate with a ninety-percent cocoa infusion only slightly fermented like red herring. That's when the first wave of nausea hit. Suddenly, the gooey paste tasted like cigarette smoke and ashy whiskey in his throat. Emil swallowed in desperation, hoping that downing the tainted crumpet would save himself the pain of tasting the tea on his tongue.

It made it worse. The oil-slick fire carried its way down his throat into his stomach, bringing forth a sickening wave of nausea that made him nearly double over like a snap ruler. Emil immediately consumed the rest of his crumpet. It was all he could do to keep himself from hurling, and he could



only be grateful there wasn't anything else in his stomach to heave up if he broke at the last moment. *What is in this shit?* All the while, the vendor was watching him with a solemn look like he was paying his respects. Emil wanted to cry.

The worst part was that it wasn't over yet. He wasn't sure how strictly he had to follow his brother's instructions, but he was told to eat the crumpet before drinking one more sip of the black-bean midnight tea. He still felt the painful taste of the tea on the crumpet that he completely consumed. If that was just a dipping sauce, what would it be like to drink from the source?

*Bottoms...up...* He probably shouldn't have, but he downed the entire cup without thinking. No landfill deserved to house something as hostile as this. Gods, no human being should have been this evil to make something as caustic as this. His heart felt like it was going to explode out of his chest. His eyes were surely bugging out of their sockets from how sick and thirsty he felt. The rest of the tea went down terribly, like drinking gruel with too much flour. And a tray of ashes. And three shots of vodka. All at once.

Emil begged his body to have the strength to hold this in. He couldn't believe it himself: his own foolish curiosity led him here. What if his brother had been lying all this time? Was there a hidden camera filming him somewhere? With one open watery eye, he looked around the kart but saw nothing that could have been used to hide a camera. It was too clean.

*Shit. Shit!* His lower lip trembled. Something was tickling at his throat and pulling at his uvula. This was too much. He was ready to hurl when suddenly a loud bell rang in front of his face, causing him to hiccup.

*Ring ring ring!* "You did it!" the vendor cried, his face grinning instantly like a light switch flicked itself to "Smile" mode. Emil watched in pure confusion as he scrawled his full name onto the blackboard with a waxy piece of chalk (or perhaps it was crayon). He almost asked how the vendor knew his name when he remembered he handed him his E-card earlier.

"Gods, what's going on?" Emil groaned when he recovered his speaking abilities.

"You drank the entire shot! Now you get your name on our list for the entire year! Awesome, right?"

"Please don't use that word around me..." he coughed. "I did what you wanted. Now what?"

"Hmm? Oh, right, right, right. You're *his* brother. I think I like your reaction better than his. When he did this, he turned this shade of white and stood there for a minute. It was pretty boring."

*"Boring" isn't what I'll describe it if you don't tell me what's going on,* Emil impatiently thought.

"So, yay, you pass! The vendor paused and leaned his head out of the kart to look around. Along this path, most of the people had gone home or were eating dinner. "You're Emil, right? You're going to take this to the chemistry building—the old one, not the modern one by the engineering department. Go right on ahead to Room 111. They'll take care of you."

There it was again. "Take care of you." The vendor handed Emil a small strap with a glass bead and a metal charm in the shape of a leaf. It looked like the perfect size for putting on his phone, but he wasn't sure if he was allowed to keep this.

"Is that all I'm supposed to do?" Emil asked for clarification.

“Yup! It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Again, those same words Lukas used on him that night. Emil was getting a weird feeling about this. Deciding he wanted nothing more to do with this mysterious stranger and the Kirkland Kart, Emil thanked him and took off in the direction of the dining commons. He was going to wash his palette with some ravioli before heading over.

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The chemistry building the vendor spoke of was behind the art building of all places. It was one of the few buildings still standing even after fifty years of tearing down the older ones. Most of the older buildings before this one were knocked down due to new regulations and old wear. A definite sense of desolation haunted these grounds. Being old and reserved for storage and underdog graduate research, dust and cobwebs now clumped the windows until nothing was visible from the inside and out. All of the plaques had long since oxidized into a turquoise green with chips and paint peeling away at the signs. Some of the metal letters were even missing, perhaps an act of vandalism or students wanting to taking a piece of the campus for themselves. How surprising that even the highest ranked university in Eliatha had behavior like this.

Emil found himself wandering through the dusty buildings until he came across a faded plaque that must have read “Chemistry” at some point. All of the letters were missing, so it was hard to tell under the old fluorescent lighting. Taking one last breath of fresh air before entering the dusty abode, Emil clicked open the sliding door and went inside.

It wasn’t as bad as he expected. The floors and walls were very tidy, and the air was breathable to say the least. The lights were still on, being that it wasn’t past studying hours yet, so there was a lower chance of Emil getting jumped by an unknown assailant. He kept telling himself this as he walked through the halls towards what he assumed to be the right direction.

The rooms counted up from 100 at the front, leading to the designated 111 he was instructed to visit. Upon reaching Room 111, he noticed there was a faint blue light flickering from behind the door and above the viewing window. Where they watching a movie inside?

Taking yet another breath and holding the charm in his hand, Emil brought his fist out to knock on the door when he stopped. *What am I thinking? You don’t need to knock to enter a classroom.* He then pulled the handle only to find it somehow locked. They weren’t allowed to do that during operating hours, were they? Well, this was a laboratory, so maybe the teaching assistants had special privileges.

Feeling betrayed by his own logic, he knocked this time and waited for a supposed hooded figure to take him into the dark depths beyond.

As it turned out, it wasn’t a hooded figure, but Arthur Kirkland, the same younger brother of the chaperones during their Chottsym trip.

“Oh. Mr. Kirkland,” Emil said, feeling embarrassed all of a sudden. “I’m sorry. I thought maybe I was...”

“Do you have it?” he butted in.

Emil blinked. “Excuse me? Oh. Yes, here. It’s this, right?” He held up the charm to him and let Arthur take it. He had many questions he wanted to ask, but with the tense condescending air

hovering over his lungs (and the aftertaste of the black-bean midnight tea lingering in his memories for life), he thought it was best to keep quiet and ask questions later.

Arthur looked back into the room, announced, "It's clean. He's good," and opened the door for him.

It was an understatement to say Emil was disappointed. The room looked like the chemistry laboratory room he went to on his own time, but this place was older and filled with fewer people. In fact, there were only two other people in here besides Arthur and himself. One of them was Lukas. The other one was the vendor who served him not one hour ago.

"Alright, what's going on?" he huffed, turning to Lukas for security. "Is this some kind of a joke? Because I'm not laughing."

"No one's laughing, Ice," Lukas smiled and walked up to him like any proud brother would. "I'm very glad you were able to pass the trial. Welcome to the Magic Club."

"What?" Emil was lost.

The vendor spoke up. "We're a super secretive club that only gets members through special trials and invitations. That's why you never see us at the club rush fairs. You're lucky because your brother's been a member for a while, otherwise you would have never found us."

The poor confused freshmeat furrowed his eyebrows and desperately turned to his brother for answers. "Lukas, please tell me why I'm here. I have school tomorrow, and I played along with your stupid game to see if you could tell me how you were able to solve that thing with Romeo. I don't want to join your club."

The three mysterious residents of the Magic Club looked at one another before looking back at Emil. None of them had spoken a word to one another, and yet it looked like they were on the same page. Was it telepathy?

"It's too late, Ice," Lukas said. "You've sealed the deal by finishing the tea. That makes you one of us."

"One of us! One of us!" the vendor chanted. Only now did Emil decide he was the slightest bit obnoxious when he wasn't behind the counter of the kart of calamity.

"You don't have to do anything in the club once you're a member," Lukas continued to explain. "You can think of it as a hangout spot we like to gather around to discuss our fascination with magic." Now that Emil thought about it, his brother *was* always interested in the supernatural despite being rigorous in his medical studies. Who would've thought?

"But I'm not a magic fanatic like you," Emil reminded his brother all the same.

"Maybe not right now," Lukas smiled, "but I solved your problem, didn't I? Wouldn't you like to be able to do that all of the time?"

Only then did the vendor go over and snicker next to Lukas' ear. "Lukas, I think you're scaring your brother. I mean, I'd never do that to my brother, but he wouldn't be scared like this."

"I know, I know," Lukas creepily chuckled. "It was fun while it lasted."

Emil couldn't believe his ears. His blood was boiling. "Then this really was all a joke?"

"Not all of it, no. Not the part about using magic to change Romeo's mind. I really did just tell him a few things here and there, and he was pleasantly cooperative. Everything else is real, however. This really is the Magic Club and the Magic Club's meeting room. Meetings are held every Tuesday evening, but since there are only three members present at this university, they're more like get-togethers. We do have a bit of a rivalry in cult practices with another club, however."

Arthur cleared his throat. "And that would be the Tea Club."

Somehow Emil knew that.

"Yes, we like to keep ourselves as secretive as possible. The Tea Club is not far behind, but we know it exists through various sources. Not many people know the Magic Club truly exists."

Emil frowned. "The whole point of your rivalry is to see who is the most secret? Isn't that stupid?"

"Not if you want to prevent a saturation of unenthusiastic members," his brother replied. He said this, but Emil was wondering if it was because his brother was naturally shy. Lukas preferred being in a circle of people he was familiar with rather than having to open up to them one by one. A little trio like this made perfect sense for his reclusive brother.

"But now we have four members!" the vendor excitedly said. "This'll be great. Now we'll have someone new to practice using the tarots and charms on." He sighed. "I wish *my* brother was old enough to join while I was still here. You're so lucky, Lukas."

"I'm not your guinea pig," Emil responded with disapproval. "If this is all there is to this, then I'm leaving."

"Hang on, little brother," Lukas flew to him and barred the way out. "You're going to want this for the next time you come here." He handed over a charm much like the one used to gain access to this place, only this was fastened with a purple glass bead and a metal charm in the shape of a dragon. It also had a key. "I'm so proud of you."

Emil didn't know what his brother was proud of, but he took the charm to prevent any resistance.

Before stepping out, Arthur called to him, "You can come in here any time you want if you need somewhere quiet to work. This room is reserved to the Kirklands and anyone else with permission, so feel free to use it. Just don't break anything, and don't eat or drink out of the beakers."

"Got it. Bye, Lukas." Emil begrudgingly left with more questions than he went in with. He stumbled his way back to Opal Hall somehow and took the elevator up to his room. Leon was there when he got back.

"Whoa, where did you go, Ice?" Leon removed his headphones and stared in awe at how oddly alert he looked.

"Somewhere with my brother," he muttered which was quite the truth. "I'm going to shower." He was grabbing his clothes and shower caddy while his roommate continued to talk.

"Didja get your midterm grades back yet?"

“Haven’t checked them. You?”

Leon smirked. “Straight A’s.”

“Asshole,” Emil hissed to Leon’s astonishment.

“What’s wrong with you? Is it your time of the month?”

“No! Shut up!” he shouted and slammed the door on his way out.

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Later that night, Emil couldn’t fall asleep until seven in the morning. His heart wanted to explode.

## Chapter 24

### Collage Diaries 24

“You look like a sack o’ shit.”

Every sound, every syllable, every word cut itself deep into Emil’s deteriorating soul as he rolled off to the side and stared at the ceiling above him. It was late afternoon now. He was still in his bed. On a Wednesday.

Emil had skipped all his classes.

“I *feel* like a sack of shit,” he told Leon who had just gotten back from his economics class. “What time is it?”

“It’s...two hours until dinner.”

Emil sat up like a spring toy. “Why didn’t you wake me?! I had lecture today!”

“So did I.”

He furiously punched his pillow and flopped back down on his springy mattress. “Leon...I’m so screwed.”

His friend hadn’t changed his smug reaction. “Ice, like, you don’t have to go to class every day in college. It’s not the end of the world. No one takes attendance.” But some classes did. In fact, Emil’s chemistry lab and culinary class had mandatory attendance required to pass. Thankfully it wasn’t Thursday or a Friday or else he would have been in deep trouble.

“Oh gods...” he groaned and cursed his misfortune. He knew what had happened. It was that black-bean midnight tea. The accursed stuff must have rocketed his blood pressure and kept him awake longer than he wanted. His sleeping schedule would be messed up at this rate.

Leon seemed to be getting a similar picture because he then mentioned something about the dreaded Kirkland Kart. “Hey, like, I saw your name on the blackboard while getting something from the Kirkland Kart, Ice. Did you, like, drink what I think you drank?”

Emil didn’t care anymore. “Yes,” he replied.

Leon was howling with laughter. “Why didn’t you tell me? I wanted to see it! Was it really as bad as they say?”

“That and then some,” he unenthusiastically bubbled out through pressed lips.

“Shit, if *you* think it’s bad, then I know it’s bad. You serve some weird food at home, you know that?”

“Shut up, Leon.” Emil was tired of this. The stupid event with the so-called Magic Club had completely destroyed his week. He wasn’t sure if he would be able to fall asleep before midnight now.

“Alright, alright. No need to get snippy on me,” his roommate was still chuckling. “Wait until your brother hears about this. He’ll wind up in a fit.”

Emil nearly blurted out that his brother was the cause of all of this, but he kept his mouth shut. The Magic Club was supposed to be a secret club if one could call it a club at all. As much as he felt spiteful towards its members and their ridiculous rite of passage, he wasn’t about to go telling everyone of its existence. Who knew? Perhaps one day Room 111 would be a useful place to study in.

“So, Ice, what’re you going to do now that you’ve cut classes?” Leon was grinning. It was annoying that he wouldn’t leave, and he smelled of the outdoors, coloring leaves, classroom seats, and all. “Wow, I thought you’d be stronger than this. Even I haven’t cut yet.”

“No need to rub it in my face,” Emil sighed. He rolled over and told his roommate to move over so he could get back down. “I’ll just E-mail Lili and Michelle and ask them what happened.”

“Hmm, good thinking. Too bad your brother couldn’t do that. See? It pays to have friends.”

“Not right now, Leon.”

Emil sat down at his desk and popped open his laptop. He went to his school website and to the classes’ personal sites where lectures were always displayed after class. It was a pity he couldn’t understand the context of some of the lecture slides without being present to the lecture in the first place. He would have to ask Lili and Michelle for their notes.

After shooting an E-mail his colleagues’ ways, he decided to work on some homework and study for his upcoming chemistry quiz. Leon, in the meantime, reverted to his old hobbies of playing *Hetalia Fantasia* again.

Roughly an hour into their activities, Leon looked up at his roommate. “Ice, you wanna grab a bite to eat? I’ll bet you’re hungry.”

He was right. Barely two hours after waking up after a long rest, Emil’s brain and stomach were completely drained of food and fuel. He needed to eat something before he became exhausted again. “Sure. I’ll get ready.”

The roommates passed by Feliks on their way to the stairs, chatting with someone over his pink-cased smartphone complete with his matching pink leather handbag. Emil didn’t have enough experience to tell if it was genuine dyed leather or the fake manufactured stuff. However, knowing it was Feliks Łukasiewicz, the fashion design major, it was enough for him to believe he cared about genuine material for his accessories.

“What a package,” Leon commented as they climbed down the stairs.

Beyond the glass wall encasing the stairwell, Emil could see students returning from their classes. He groaned as he remembered he should have been one of those students returning from the library or office hours. He was too ashamed to face his professors today, having not familiarized himself with the new material.

Leon, to cut the silence which he disliked, began to strike up a conversation with Emil. “Ice, why’d you decide to try the black-bean midnight tea?”

Emil pressed his lips together as he remembered how the Magic Club wanted to be as secretive as possible. He would need to think carefully and quickly, for Leon was good in both qualities. "...I needed it to study up on my chemistry for my quiz coming up, so I thought I'd try out the tea." He paused for effect. "They said it had a lot of caffeine, but I didn't know it had *that* much."

His friend smirked. "When'd you go to sleep?"

"Seven," he answered without needing to think. Leon burst out laughing.

"You poor dumb fuck! I'll have to try it the next time I need to cram. And, like, you got your name on the blackboard!"

"Wasn't worth it," Emil muttered.

Fortunately for Emil, Leon didn't pry into his fabricated reason any more than he feared. His main concern was now trying to find something decent to eat.

Tonight was potpie and beignet night. That meant the dining commons would be crowded with students and staff trying to get the popular flaky crusted savory pies and fluffy fried desserts before they ran out. Emil had completely forgotten about today's dinner specials, having been overwhelmed with guilt at oversleeping, so when they entered the dining commons, they were greeted by a growing crowd that hogged up every table and booth on the inside. It was a cool night tonight, so Emil thought they might have to take their food back to their room if it came to that.

"Some crowd, huh, Ice?"

"Yeah."

They got in line, as neither could resist passing up the rare selections and began to talk some more.

"What are you guys doing in the cinematography club right now?" Emil thought to bring up since he was now in two clubs, himself.

"We use a bunch of equipment from the video arts department and see how they work," Leon explained. "Right now, we're just getting familiar with the technology, but, like, after we're all caught up, Alfred wants us to divide into separate groups so we can work on a film project."

Emil raised an eyebrow. "And actual film, you mean? How do you think that's going to turn out?"

"I dunno. He has a script written up and everything. None of us have seen it yet, so I don't know how good everything's gonna be. But it's all for fun, you know?"

Emil rolled his eyes. "Knowing you, I bet you want to be in charge of the choreography."

Leon smiled. "Hey, that's not a bad idea, Ice."

The conversation about clubs went on until they managed to get to the front. Leon insisted that they find a spot in the dining commons while Emil wanted to return to his room and eat in peace.

"I'm not about to let you stay in line for this long only to slip out on eating here," Leon stubbornly said.



“What’s wrong with eating at the dorm? I want to study, and you can do your stupid online games. I’ll bet you just don’t want to pay the extra to-go fee, you cheap ass.”

Leon ignored him. “Look at this crowd, Ice! There are people you can still meet, Ice! You have to think business opportunities!”

“Walking stereotype!” Emil snapped with nothing else he could think of. He knew they were going to be eating here. Once Leon had his mind set on something, he was willing to change very little; the only thing good about his personality was that he was at least willing to listen to other inputs before carrying himself out, if only to avoid conflict in the process.

Luckily for them, they managed to snag large helpings of potpie and beignets before adding other side dishes to their growing trays. Now all that was left was to find a place to put it all.

“Our table’s taken,” Emil reported to his friend. “Bar seats are also full.” By bar seats, he was referring to the long table at the edge of the windows reserved for single diners. Large groups weren’t recommended to eat there.

“I don’t see any open booths…” Leon continued to look. “Wanna eat outside?”

“No.”

The last time they tried, the wind blew their napkins away, and their bangs got in their eyes and mouths while eating. If they were having trouble with short hair, they couldn’t imagine what it must’ve been like for people with long hair. It was also cold tonight.

“Then how about—Wait. Ice, is he waving at you?” Leon turned around just in case and saw that there wasn’t anyone behind them. Over past the central tables to a comfortable circular booth, were two faces Emil didn’t want to see so soon again.

“Oh… I think that’s…”

It was Mr. Arthur Kirkland and the vendor, whom Emil hadn’t been properly introduced to. Emil wondered if it was safe for them to eat together, but if they were strict with the trio’s secrets, then he was certain they wouldn’t bring up anything about the Magic Club.

“I think they *are* waving to us,” he said to Leon, deciding it would be harmless to see what they wanted. “Mr. Kirkland’s there, do you see?”

“Oh yeah,” Leon chuckled. “What does he want with us?”

In any case, they went over to find out.

“You boys aren’t getting into any trouble, are you?” Arthur narrowed his eyes as he moved over for Leon to invite himself onto the seat.

“Nope,” the more reckless of the pair grinned. “We’ve been behaving ourselves, sir.” He looked over to the other individual seated with them. “Who’s this?” he then asked the other companion sitting across from him.

The vendor, as Emil knew him by, looked to be around the same age as Lukas and Arthur, not an

undergraduate student by any means. However, beyond his more mature image, he had a childish air about him that indicated a mischievous personality. Strangest of all—and Emil had been thinking about this since seeing him yesterday—he had red eyes just like Professor Beilschmidt and a pointy fang-like tooth off to the side of his incisors.

*Maybe he's a magical vampire*, Emil joked to himself, though he knew that would never fly even within the Magic Club.

“This is Vladimir,” Arthur nodded to his Magic Club acquaintance. “He’s working on his master’s degree.”

Leon smiled for good measure. “What field?”

“I got my bachelor’s degree in astronomy and theoretical physics,” he grinned a toothy grin. “I’m trying to get my master’s in particulate behavior in outer space.”

Emil and Leon winced. Both of those fields were contradictory in the school of sciences. On one hand, astronomy was considered to be a vague field for the specially dedicated and quirky. On the other, theoretical physics was not a subject to be taken lightly, requiring rigorous amounts of studying, application, and little to no rewards in the occupational field. Emil believed this was why this Vladimir character had gone on to earn a master’s degree: to improve his credentials.

“So…” Leon took a sip of his lemon-infused tea. “...what kind of work do you do?”

“Mostly recording patterns sent to us through the local space studying program.” Vladimir stopped to take a bite out of his meatloaf.

*I wonder if his fangs have any additional functions*, Emil thought quietly to himself as the conversation went on without him. The beignets were delicious.

Leon was also at his dessert. “That’s cool. I don’t know if my field really needs graduate school to make a career out of it.”

“And what do you do?” Arthur asked.

“Business management,” came the answer. “I want to know the numbers and tactics in business, and after that, I’m out.”

The activities coordinator gave a little smile. From how thick his eyebrows were, it was hard to tell whether he was being sincere or contemptuous. “Funny of you to come to an institution where research is the most praised thing it’s known for. Why not a college, instead?”

“Family stuff,” Leon shortly answered and moved to his friend. “Plus, I couldn’t leave this little guy alone all by himself.”

“Leon!” Emil hissed and scooted away.

“Cute...!” Vladimir squeaked to his friend. Emil knew Vladimir knew who he was beyond his non-introduction, but what about Leon? From an outside perspective, one might have gotten the wrong idea.

“Were friends,” he blurted out and embarrassingly resumed his meal.

Arthur politely smiled when taking note of Emil's reaction. "Yes, I can see that. What good friends you must be. You were squabbling among yourselves back at Chottsym, and since you're freshmen, I take it you're roommates?"

That was quite the quick deduction, Emil thought and nodded in reply. It was at this point that he felt that this gathering needed to end. He was almost done with his food, and with Arthur and Vladimir looking down at them, he felt belittled and exposed. Leon was still talking away as he would with any new stranger he could roll the ball with, so if Emil wanted to do something, he needed to speak out or deliver subtle hints.

The best thing to do was to give him a kick under the table, classic style, and Emil did just that.

Leon pretended to not notice anything in the beginning, but once the second kick came, he directed the conversation to a close as any "smooth expert" might pull off.

"Speaking of economics, I have to go back and finish up my reading assignment. Ice, you done?"

"I am," he replied, relieved that Vladimir and Arthur paid little attention to him. "It was nice seeing you, sirs," he said to his upper classmen and was about to go after Leon to the disposing belt when Vladimir said something aloud.

"Chicken brown cow!" he laughed quite hysterically and drew a bit of attention to himself. Fortunately, as universities went, most people quickly ignored him and resumed their conversations and dining.

Arthur rolled his eyes, not as bothered as he should have been with the eccentric vendor. "Not so loud, now, Vlad. We don't want everyone knowing the code, do we?"

*Code?*

"Emil, join us next time, okay? We'll teach you about the theoretical patterns of the cosmos!"

Either he had gone off into astronomy land or that was a hint that they wanted him to attend the next meeting.

*I thought Lukas said I didn't need to go to the meetings.* He was frustrated, sure, but aside from the little caffeine fiasco, he couldn't imagine what would be the harm in attending one more "get-together," as they were also called.

"I'll think about it," he told them and bid them good night.

Leon had already finished putting his tray away and was shining a complimentary apple when Emil returned. "Were you asking them about stars and asteroids or something? What took you?"

"Mr. Kirkland told me to keep an eye on you and make sure you don't make my grades suffer," is what Emil told him. To this Leon smirked.

"That guy's a goody two shoes. Don't mind him." He pocketed his apple and led the way back to their room. "I don't bother you that much, do I?"

Emil huffed. The fact that Leon *knew* he bothered him bothered him. Still, he couldn't help saying,

“No.”

“Thought so,” Leon smiled rather triumphantly. “Now let’s go play some *Hetalia Fantasia* when we get back.”

## Chapter 25

Had the cloaked grand sorcerer been present, the puffin master and the Chan king would have been demolished within seconds. Both of them didn't know that during his spare time, the cross curser would train in high-level dungeons to collect rare items and rack up on experience points, resulting in nonstop increasing levels in competition with the King of the North.

Since the cross curser was left off to his medical studies tonight, however, PuffinMaster0624 and KingChan were free to roam the lands of *Hetalia Fantasiato* their hearts' content.

"Good thing your brother's not here, eh, Ice?" Leon spoke off screen in the real world. There was little point in hosting a private chat server since their users were in the same room. It made things quite convenient for cooperative play.

"He's probably off studying," Emil spoke with relief in his voice. His brother would have given him a tongue lashing if he found out he was playing in the middle of the term. "Where should we go first?"

"There's a dungeon not too far from here we can get stuff in," Leon told him, leading the way through the forest and finding any trolls lurking through the trees. Being a merchant class, Leon's character technically wasn't very strong, but he had heta boosts and more frequent item drops which made him part of the wealthiest classes in the game. As a result, his character used high-powered items that overpowered his basic status elements to the point where he didn't need to worry about his base strength.

Emil, however, chose to be a training battle mage. His class was supposed to be skilled in all categories ranging from physical combat to magical, and he would be well-versed in alchemic spells and conjuration—if only he was at a higher level. Thanks to Lukas and Mathias killing all the monsters back in their high school days, Emil's character hadn't even had the chance to upgrade his class level. He was still a journeyman. Hopefully a little grinding for levels with Leon would fix all of that.

"Stay close, like sixteen tiles, so the bracelets work," Leon instructed Emil. "It took me, like, forever to find a matching pair of those experience bracelets, so don't go dying on me, okay?"

The lesser experienced of the two had never experienced death before, and suspected Leon hadn't either. However, Leon was more versed in the game, so he knew its ropes and tricks.

"What happens when you die?"

"They made it so you, like, essentially lose all the items you collected outside of your last inn save spot. Plus you lose, like, half your heta. It's super unforgiving, so don't die."

"Okay." Easier said than done. On the mini map, Emil could already see red dots indicated monsters arriving. They were barely thirteen tiles into the dungeon and already they were being bombarded with enemies. "Leon, are you sure you can take them?"

"It's okay, Ice. Watch. Oh, step back, wouldja?"

PuffinMaster0624 stepped back and watched as KingChan pulled out a fancy-looking grenade and threw it in the center of the hoard. The item proceeded to explode in a shower of electrical sparks that did massive damage to the circle of enemies. In less than ten seconds, every single monster was dead. Emil gained five levels.

"Oh..." So this was what he had been denied of when his brother and Mathias killed the monsters for him. Perhaps after a few hours, he could actually *beuseful*.

"C'mon, if we beat this dungeon, we'll get this item that has something like a hundred attack power and two hundred magic."

That sounded useful to Emil. His basic mage scythe only had twenty attack and ten magic. Having a weapon like that would be considerably more useful to him over Leon, seeing as how Leon's main weapon of choice were knives.

"Do you think I could have it when we're done?" he timidly asked as they blew through another wave of monsters.

To his shock, Leon laughed at him. "Ice, your class is too low. You can't equip it even if you had one. You're so behind."

Emil lowered his eyes to his level bar. He had already gained another three levels. Meanwhile, Leon was somewhere around ninety whatever. These monsters were quick pickings to him.

"...Do you care that I'm so behind?"

"What?" Leon was busy attacking a large dungeon troll. This variety had green crystal spikes on its back that indicated a higher level. Mathias had fought some of these before.

Emil swallowed. "I mean, you can be doing other stuff, but instead we're stuck here fighting monsters with me tagging along."

KingChan whittled the last troll's hit points to three thousand, still ten times as much as PuffinMaster0624 had, and yet he merely took out his daggers and stabbed the beast until it collapsed with a satisfying groan. Emil gained another two levels.

"It's not your fault Lukas and Mathias were babying you back then," Leon said, his eyes glued to his screen. He muttered, "We're going left here," before continuing on. "I was one of the first people to play this game when it came out, so it only makes sense that I'd be better than you, right?"

"Maybe?"

Leon smiled. "Besides, once we get you to a high enough level, you can do all the fighting for *me*. That way I won't have to waste all my heta on items anymore. See? It's a win-win."

"Ah."

The rest of the dungeon became cakewalk after Emil grew accustomed to Leon's pacing. Leon mentioned that while he normally ran through the dungeon to loot all of the items, they would be sweeping the entire place to gain some experience points. In addition to Leon memorizing all of the traps and hidden treasures, the entire expedition took less than an hour. Emil reached level twenty-five by the time they found the boss room.

"You're gonna wanna stay back for this one, Ice," Leon told his partner as they approached the final door. "So, like, this guy shoots poison and tries to grab you with his pincers." He checked Emil's screen. "You should have an antidote spell by now, so you're going to be my healer while I take care of this guy, okay?"

"Okay...? How will I know you're poisoned?" Before doing this, Lukas had casted anti-poison

charms on their party, so he never knew what the status looked like.

"Green bubbles. You'll know when you see them. It'll make the fight go faster if you're there to heal me. Ready?"

Emil's fingers were resting on the hot keys. "Ready."

"Alright, then! Here we go!"

KingChan unlocked the door and opened it. A cutscene played out where a large scorpion-like creature came crawling from a blasted hole in the dungeon floor. Its shell was a shiny and chrome coat with green gas spewing from its intimidating mandible like mouth. It then reeled back its sharp tail and let out a shrill chitter that began the fight.

Immediately after the cutscene ended, the boss' tail came crashing down in front of the players.

"Back up!" Leon shouted and Emil obeyed. The master of puffins stepped out of the boss' reach just in time before it got stuck into the stone.

"Chance time!" KingChan cried as he threw forth a gathering of bombs, powders, debuffing items, and more. Somewhere in the fight, Emil noticed that he had some power-ups, too, meaning Leon must have thrown him some items.

*Has he played cooperatively before?* he wondered as he noticed the green bubbles shooting up on Leon's character. Just as poison was meant to do, it started to annihilate KingChan's hit points at an increasingly rapid rate.

"Heal!"

PuffinMaster0624 didn't need to be told twice. Emil pressed the hotkey and directed it to KingChan, upon which a blue light encased him and liberated him of the detrimental status condition.

"Thanks." KingChan then threw a yellow smoke bomb that stunned the monster in place. Little dizzy stars circled its horrendous head while its opponent whittled away at its health with firedust and bolting bombs.

All of a sudden, the beast's shell exploded off, revealing the soft and green glowing body underneath. Emil made a face as its appendages seemed to pulsate and squirm like the many legs that carried it. That was when the poison began to fly. In its final moments, it began to spit acid and green gas left and right throughout the room's layout. Emil was hit a few times, himself, and it was only through his hotkey setting that he was able to quickly access his healing spell and save him and Leon.

Whenever Leon's hit points would get to a certain number (Emil never figured out the exact threshold), he would snap at his partner to quickly hit him with a healing spell. While considerably higher in level than at the beginning, Emil's character did a pathetic job of restoring any hit points. Leon's hit points bar had around roughly eight thousand at maximum capacity. Because Emil still had to return to the town to upgrade his class level, his magic was still subpar—this and he still had a default mage scythe armed at the ready.

Leon never complained once, however. Even when the going seemed rough and his character's hit points bar turned yellow, he continued to press on and throw his items until his basic inventory ran dry.

Finally, after what must have been a good seven minutes, the boss' hit points reached zero, and the creature melted in a bubbling puddle of green acid and goo.

"Got him!" Leon beamed. "Good job, Ice!" He went for the item and looted the boss before taking them both outside with a warping stone. In a quick flash of light, they were outside of the dungeon and just a little ways toward the next town.

"You were good," Emil chuckled, relieved that they managed to get out of there alive.

His friend was still smiling. "That was way faster with two people. How many levels did you get from that last guy?"

Emil checked. "I was at level two before..."

"Yeesh."

"...and now I'm at level twenty-nine."

"Hey, not bad. See? It's pretty cool having someone with experience-sharing bracelets, huh?"

"I guess..."

"Let's get back to the town and save. We'll get your class upgraded, too."

"Okay."

The two set off in the direction of the nearest town located in between a vast field and the mining mountains where their dungeon was situated. There were a few monsters along the way, but with Leon leading the front, there was nothing Emil had to be worried about. As they got closer, his heart began to race. He was finally going to be allowed to upgrade his journeyman status. What would his brother think when he saw him with a better weapon and fancier gear?

Apparently it would only be speculation for now, because as they were nearing the village icon on the field map, another player came running by wielding what looked like...

"A microphone?"

Emil raised his eyebrows as the player came closer, but Leon was having a different set of reactions altogether.

"Shit! Fuck this guy!" he cursed and pushed against Emil's character. "Run, Ice!"

"Wh—Okay?" With little to no gear on him, PuffinMaster0624 was able to run away at top speed. However, also being a journeyman, his stamina was incredibly poor, so he only got so far before Leon, and soon the mysterious new player, caught up.

"Leon, I can't run anymore!" Emil cried, feeling helpless and fearful that this person was going to attack them and squander all of their time.

"Fucking camping-ass thief," Leon grumbled and began throwing a new set of items. These looked far more powerful than those he had used in the caves, sporting more sparkles and bigger explosion ranges. "Ice, we need to circle back into the town!"

"How?!" He was in a panic. The player was fast, and while he didn't seem to be attack, he didn't want to find out what that microphone weapon did when used.



Then, Leon ran up in the front and made a wide turn around the last explosion. "I stunned him! We've gotta keep moving! Stay behind me, Ice!"

Emil followed after him, looking at his mini map to see if the new player was chasing after them. A few times in the middle, they had to stop for his character's stamina to recharge. During those pauses, the player's green icon could be seen running for them again.

"Leon, he's catching up!"

The town's icon was within sight. All they had to do was enter it, and they would be safe from any player damage.

"We're almost there, Ice." He was trying to sound calm, but it was easier for one to be calm when his level was over ninety.

"My stamina..." Emil whimpered as the green bar went down again. He cursed his brother and Mathias for babysitting him all this time. If he died before reaching the town, then this entire playthrough would have been for nothing. He would have turned around and started shooting spells at the player, but not only was it in bad taste, he was sure he would barely make a scratch on him.

"Okay..." Leon was breathing hard in real life. "Ice, I'll stun him if he comes close. I'm going to give you a stamina potion. Tell me if he's coming. I'm going to open up my inventory."

Emil would have thought that it wouldn't require that much time to sift through his inventory screen to look for a stamina potion of all things, but as high-level merchant classes were concerned, not only were their rosters larger than most players', it was so rare that he would run out of stamina that he had to search deeper into his menu.

"Shit, where is it?" Leon frustratingly grumbled. "Ice, how are you doing on stamina?"

"Fine," he said. "I can almost—Now! Forget it! Leon, let's go!"

They began to sprint back towards the wall, and at this point, the player caught up to them holding his microphone. Around his character were glowing golden music notes that spun around him, and Emil noticed that his character was moving faster than before.

"Haste buff!" Leon snapped and prepared another stunning powder bomb. He chucked five of them behind him and continued to run. Again, the town icon was in view. Their hearts were racing. "Almost there, Ice! Tell me when you—"

"I'm out, Leon! I'm out!"

Leon immediately shuffled through his menus and began searching for the stamina potion once again. It wasn't the pink potion, nor was it the red one. Blue, purple...

"Got it!" He pulled out a green potion from his inventory and set the command to toss. "Ice, grab it and use it right now!"

"A-Ah..." Emil fumbled with his keys and pressed the menu key. He was digging through his inventory and setting the potion to "Use" when suddenly a screen of red appeared and shot him out of his menu mode. "Leon!" His character had taken damage somehow. When he looked back, he saw that the microphone-wielding player had tossed a pebble at him.

"I missed! Fuck, hold on, Ice. Use it and run. Let me just...Fuck you! Stay still!"

His character had resorted to swinging with his daggers to distract the player while Emil went back into his inventory and successfully used the potion. He shouted to his friend that he was booking it back to the town and continued to run backwards as the other player attempted to maneuver around Leon.

"Stupid asshole..." Leon grumbled and ran after him. "Ice, keep going!"

Emil was almost there. The town was right in front of him. All he needed to do was find the entrance gate and enter through it to be safe from monsters and other players. "I'm almost..." He held his breath. His heart was racing and his fingers trembled. The gate was right in front of him. He could see the "Enter" command popping up. Without a second's thought, he pushed the "Enter" key and made it safely within the town's loading screen. "Leon, I'm in!"

"Good..." He sounded relieved albeit a little pissed off. "I'm going in after you. Find the inn and save."

"Okay." Emil wasted no time heading for the inn icon and hitting the "Save" command. His character went inside the inn and went to sleep, prompting a save screen next.

Not a minute later, Leon came in after him and saved, too. When he woke up, Emil was waiting for him outside of the inn to upgrade his class.

"What was that?" Emil asked when they began walking to their destination.

"Some stupid bandit character," Leon snorted. "They camp out around the towns and look for players to loot their gear and XP."

Emil wrinkled his nose. That was a dirty way to play the game. "And what class was he?"

"That one new performer class. They use a bunch of buffs to make their characters super strong. On their own, they're pretty weak, though. I don't know what that guy was doing..." He fell into an uncomfortable silence as his brain began to turn its gears. "You know what?"

"What?"

"I'm gonna go after that guy."

Emil rolled his eyes. "It's not worth killing him. I thought you were going to watch me upgrade."

"No, I wasn't talking about killing him; I meant looking for him and sending him spam."

"Don't do that."

"I'm gonna do it."

"How will you even?"

"Cheng taught me. Just watch and learn—Wait. Let's get you better gear first."

KingChan led PuffinMaster0624 to the guilds where all of the classes and players came to upgrade their characters to higher base stats and weapon rosters. Since Emil was a battle mage, he went to the Magic Guild and sorted through his new selection of upgrades.

"You're going to want to upgrade your armor and weapons because your tier levels are shit," Leon guided him through. "Then choose the 'Assist Buff' because if you're helping me out, we both get boosts in our stats." He waited for Emil to click the options. "Now you wanna click on 'Beast

Killer' so once you get strong enough, you'll get a bonus damage percentage when killing beast-class monsters."

Emil frowned. "This is complicated..."

"Yeah, I know. The merchant's class is just one straight line." He waited for Emil to hit the last one before exhausting his class upgrades. "Okay, you're all set. Let's go sell this loot and I'll buy you new stuff."

Emil smiled. "...Thanks, Leon."

"No problem."

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Leon's face transformed from casual chill player to calculating and mischievous. He broke into the game's website and punched in a few commands into a program Emil knew nothing about and began to search for the player's name.

"Fucking 'Originator' was his name, right?" Leon asked Emil who had since logged off and was watching from his bed.

"I think so."

"What a shit name. Well, take a look at this. I'm going to find his username and get into his e-mail. I can even find his IP address and send a bunch of spam channels his way."

"Wow, Leon." Emil sounded unimpressed.

"He almost killed you, Ice."

"I know." He wrinkled his nose and tried to imagine what might have happened to Lukas had he killed them those weeks ago. "Remind me never to mess with your computer stuff."

"Gotcha." He looked up at Emil. "Ready to see me flood his computer?"

"I'm watching." He leaned over from his railing and saw Leon's propped up laptop screen.

Leon was snickering. "The best part is because we're using the school's Internet, it doesn't matter if they track us down."

"Sure." He watched as Leon theatrically pressed the "Enter" button on his keyboard and clapped his hands as a torrent bar began streaming what was supposedly spam and junky virus mail to the player's e-mail address. Emil was certain that the person behind the player could have easily ignored the messages, but then, he wasn't an expert on computers. He watched with uninterested eyes as Leon finished sending the spam and sat back on his bed.

"His computer is going to feel that," he smugly grinned. "I'm done. Are you gonna shower first?"

"No." Emil flopped on his pillow and buried his face into the covers. His puffin plushie toy tilted to its side. "I barely went outside today. I'm good. Going to sleep."

"Okay. I'll leave you alone." He closed his laptop, gathered his things, and headed for the bathroom. On his way out, he flicked the light switches off before shutting the door. Emil slept like a log. It was before midnight.

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